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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Unbinding the Female Prometheus*: L'Écriture féminine* in Selected Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Odpoutání Prométhei: *L'Écriture féminine* ve vybrané poezii Sylvie Plathové

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Michaela Piňosová

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Permission

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

Key Words

Key Words: L'Écriture féminine, French feminism, women's poetry, Sylvia Plath, Hélène Cixous

Klíčová slova: L'Écriture féminine, francouzský feminismus, ženská poezie, Sylvia Plath, Hélène Cixous

Abstract

The definition of one's femininity and its reflection in poetic language are two recurring issues examined by contemporary feminist critics. In their works, they consistently challenge the opinion that true poetry is essentially masculine, and that a woman poet is inevitably an inferior poet. Sylvia Plath, whose poetry represents the central subject of this thesis, could hardly be considered an inferior poet. Despite her early death, Plath's poetry continues to be immensely influential, and it tends to be adopted as an example by feminist critics who attempt to define the branch American women's poetry, reaching back to poets such as Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson. From their point of view, Plath's works illustrate the fact that women's poetry has not only its history, but also its language. One may thus discover interesting parallels between the French-based concept of *l'écriture féminine* and Plath's poetic language.

For the representatives of the *l'écriture féminine* movement Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Western discourse is phallogocentric, i.e. based on the centrality of the phallus as a primary signifier. To disrupt the traditional (masculine) discourse, they neither propose a total split between the "male" and the "female" signifiers nor do they encourage women to usurp power in patriarchal culture; they rather advocate new ways of thinking and writing about women. The purpose of *l'écriture féminine* is to encourage women writers to reconsider not only the subject matter of their poetry, but also propose unconventional uses of poetic language.

Although Plath committed suicide before the majority of works discussing *l'écriture féminine* was published, her poetry opened a new landscape that was later explored by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, and that was illustrative of the impact of rules imposing restrictions on both female mind and body. Plath's works managed to create a new dimension in American literary canon which used to be dominated exclusively by white male poets. The aim of this thesis is to explore Plath's image as the female Prometheus, i.e. the woman poet bound by masculine symbolic discourse. It observes the continuous development of her poetry, and analyzes Plath's increasingly consistent attempts at including the feminine into discourse that, viewed through the lens of *l'écriture féminine,* may be viewed as the process of unbinding of the female Prometheus.

Abstrakt

Otázky ohledně definice ženskosti a její odraz v básnickém jazyce se často objevují v diskuzích současných feministických kritiček. Ty často zpochybňují názor, že pravá poezie vychází z per mužů, a že pojem „básnířka“ je méněcenným protějškem pojmu „básník.“ Sylvii Plathovou, jejíž poezie je předmětem této diplomové práce, lze jen těžko považovat za méněcennou básnířku. Přestože kariéru této autorky předčasně ukončila smrt, její básně bývají zmiňovány v souvislosti se snahou o definování žánru americké ženské poezie, jež prochází neustálým vývojem již od dob Anne Bradstreetové a Emily Dickinsonové. Verše Plathové údajně poukazují na fakt, že ženská poezie má nejen svou historii, ale i jazyk. Tato skutečnost odkrývá zajímavé paralely mezi básněmi Plathové a konceptem „l’écriture féminine.“

Podle čelních představitelek hnutí „l’écriture féminine“ Hélène Cixousové, Luce Irigarayové a Julie Kristevy je západní kultura falocentrická a zároveň logocentrická, tedy založená na statutu falusu jakožto privilegovaného signifikantu. Za účelem přetvoření tradičního (tedy převážně maskulinního) diskursu se tyto kritičky zaměřují na nové způsoby myšlení a psaní o ženách. Mimo jiné vzbuzují autorky k přehodnocení zavedených námětů a taktéž obracejí jejich pozornost ke způsobům, jakými využívají jazyk ke skládání básní. Zároveň se vymezují vůči snahám o kompletní oddělení mužského a ženského pohlaví a odrazují ženy k uzurpování moci v rámci patriarchálního systému.

Ačkoli Plathová spáchala sebevraždu dříve, než byla publikována většina studií zabývajících se „l’écriture féminine,“ její díla přiblížila negativní dopad pravidel omezujících projevy ženské mysli i těla. Současně hrála nezanedbatelnou roli v procesu přetváření amerického literárního kánonu, v minulosti ovládaného téměř výlučně muži. Účelem této diplomové práce je představit Plathovou jakožto tzv. „Prométheu,“ tedy básnířku spoutanou okovy maskulinního symbolického diskursu. Jednotlivé kapitoly mapují pozvolný vývoj její poezie a kladou důraz na četné pokusy o začlenění ženských stránek její identity do diskursu. Jinými slovy, cílem této práce je přiblížit proces, jehož konečným výsledkem je definitivní „odpoutání Prométhei.“

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Introduction

After more than fifty years of artistic and critical reception, Sylvia Plath remains a controversial figure. Fueled by her biography as well as bibliography, Plath's image in the American literary canon continues to be emotionally charged, and to write about her work means to confront numerous ethical and feminist issues, such as the relation between women and art, and, popularly, the relation between women's creativity and madness.

Being at the center of attention of both popular and critical media, these issues gradually constructed Plath's contradictory image, which tends to revolve around two extremes. First, there is condemnation, which may be understood as the degradation of Plath's artistic achievement as a part of her "suicide note."[1] Plath herself then becomes "a figure for death"[2] or "an emblematic figure of an enraged and tormented madwoman."[3] Both positions tempt feminist critics to analyze her work in order to either proclaim the author as the source of life, or to rationalize her complaints.[4] While such attempts may seem a political and ethical necessity, they may lead to the opposite extreme, which consists of elevating Plath's artistic achievement to the point of her idolization as "the martyred high priestess of contemporary poetry."[5]

In reaction to these extremes, one may as well consider what makes Plath's poetry so intriguing to the readers as well as the critics. Among other aspects, it may be Plath's ever-present search for a voice which would be distinctly *different* and "distinctly her own,"[6] a goal for which she did not hesitate to attack the very structure of language. Plath's name tends to revolve around the discussion of writing the difference, which keeps the critics preoccupied, as Virginia Woolf asserted, since "[t]he middle class woman began to write."[7]

Entering what had previously been perceived as an almost exclusively masculine sphere, women – sometimes intentionally, at other times unintentionally – engaged in a competition for the claim to linguistic primacy. In this sexual as well as textual battle, words

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[1] Katha Pollitt, "A Note of Triumph," *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 68.
[2] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 3.
[3] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land* Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 67.
[4] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 67.
[5] Carol Bere, Review of *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963, Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 59.
[6] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, "The Americanization of Sylvia," *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 99.
[7] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2000) 66.

became "weapons with which the sexes have fought over territory and authority [...]."[8] Like actual weapons, the metaphorical ones, including the pen, were considered men's tools, and women who "attempted the pen"[9] tended to be called "thieves of language" and "female Prometheuses."[10]

As an aspiring woman writer and an avid reader of Woolf's work, Plath was theoretically preoccupied with her position as a woman writer among her male counterparts. In her personal journals, she repeatedly considered her choices of artistic as well as "authentic" expression of thoughts and emotions. More often than not, she appeared to be dissatisfied with the social as well as linguistic limits she kept meeting in both poetry and prose:

> ... Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God – or the universal woman-and-man – or anything much. I am what I feel and think and do. I want to express my being as fully as I can because I somewhere picked up the idea that I could justify my being alive that way. But I am to express what I am. I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique – to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos. I am just beginning to realize how false and provincial that standard, or jumping-off place, must be. That is what is so hard for me to face.[11]

The sense of frustration that she described in this journal entry from July 1950 tempted many critics to consider Plath a victim of linguistic misogyny, and a perfect example of the "female Prometheus."

The issue of the phallogocentric structure of language, whose symbolic discourse produces the image of men fathering the text in the same way as God fathered the world[12] (i.e. the very same image which was frequently the source of Plath's frustration), gained prominence in the decades following Plath's death, particularly in the 1970s and the 1980s. This period gave rise to the linguistic project of "new French feminists," *l'écriture féminine.* Its representatives, mainly Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, reacted to the psychoanalytic and linguistic theory of Jacques Lacan. Claiming that the Lacanian model of

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[8] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land* 3.
[9] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 7.
[10] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," *Signs* 8.1 (1982) 69.
[11] Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 45.
[12] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 4.

language further reinforced the concept of the masculine ownership of language, they began searching for new possibilities of "writing the feminine."

Despite the fact that Plath died a decade before Cixous's much-quoted manifesto of *l'écriture féminine,* "The Laugh of the Medusa," saw the light in 1975, one may trace many instances of writing the feminine in her poems. This thesis considers Plath's insistence on writing herself, including her physical body, in the kind of language that is elusive to patriarchal binary schemes, that allows her to capture her "sensuous and emotional experiences"[13] and that results in unbinding of the female Prometheus. It is divided into four chapters – the first chapter introduces the theoretical framework of this thesis, and the three remaining chapters document the continuous development of Plath's poetic voice, using the slightly transformed version of Hughes' timeline suggested in his introduction to *The Collected Poems.*

The timeline in this thesis adheres to Hughes' periodization of the early phase, spanning approximately from 1956 till early 1960 and culminating with the publication of *The Colossus and Other Poems*, a collection of heavily controlled symbolic poems. It deviates from Hughes' chronology on the point of inclusion of the transitional phase (originally suggested by Marjorie Perloff), which begins in late 1960 and ends in either late 1961 or early 1962. The closure to this phase is fluid due to the postponed publication of *Crossing the Water* (it was published posthumously in 1971) as well as Hughes' editorial intervention (some of the poems in *Crossing the Water* were included in the *Ariel* manuscript, but were omitted in the published version completed by Hughes). This phase is marked by the gradual shift toward versatility, and concludes with the abandonment of fixed forms and dissolution of symbolic structures in the late phase (from 1961/2 till 1963), including Plath's last collections *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*.

Descriptions of each phase are structured in accordance with Plath's cyclical preoccupations with the female body and identity, considerations of the dichotomy of women's fertility and creativity, and mutual implications between living and dying, motivated by seemingly opposing drives, i.e. female desire (*jouissance*) and the death-drive (the ever-present strife for self-obliteration and self-destruction). In addition, each chapter is opened by a brief introduction reflecting the biographical and critical context of a given collection and a documentation of the thematic as well as the stylistic development, and is concluded with a summary of main arguments brought forth in the respective chapter. The conclusion of this

[13] Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvert* (London: Routledge. 1966) 169.

thesis then summarizes individual phases of Plath's gradual transformation of linguistic structures that resulted in unbinding of the female Prometheus.

1. Shedding the Manacles: *L'Écriture féminine*

The purpose of the first chapter is to provide an insight into the theoretical framework of this thesis, i.e. the feminist critique of language, with an emphasis on the French-based concept of *l'écriture féminine*. It introduces its most prominent representatives, presents foundations of its theoretical approaches and explores possible misconceptions and limitations revolving around this rather open concept. Speaking metaphorically, this chapter will consider how the manacles binding the female Prometheuses are forged, and propose the potential ways in which they could be shed.

1.1. The Feminist Critique of Language

Although it may give an impression of a unified theoretical framework, the feminist critique of language is characterized by a proliferation of discourses which share a central belief that language is not gender neutral. Just like the way our identities are sexed, language is sexed as well, and it conditions a culture based on sexual difference.[14] This paradigm anticipates that feminine discourse is different from its masculine version, which constitutes the symbolic foundations of Western patriarchal culture.

As the most concentrated form of symbolic language, literature is considered to be almost exclusively a male domain. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar illustrate the way male sexuality is presented as the essence of literary power by quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins, according to whom "[t]he male quality is the creative gift."[15] The value of the feminine is thus reduced – it is no longer part of different discourse, it becomes the unexplored Other. Such tendency led a number of feminist critics to consider how to write the difference, i.e. to not only write about different matters, but also to transform traditional discourse.

Despite being most notably associated with the French-based literary movement of *l'écriture féminine*, the idea of anatomically determined language was put forth much earlier. In 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote "Women and Fiction," in which she considered the status of women writers (a profession restricted to privileged women who had all the economic, social and educational support) in the masculine sphere of interest. In addition to the political and aesthetic dimension of this thought, Woolf pondered technical difficulties connected to

[14] Luce Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference,* trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 32.
[15] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 3-4.

women's writing, arguing that the grammatical structure of a sentence is not adapted to women writers: "It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use."[16] In a sense, Woolf contributed to the tradition of feminists who took up the challenge of reinventing language to make it more accommodating to women's creative efforts.

Contrary to popular belief, post-modern literary theory of *l'écriture féminine* does not share Woolf's modernist radicalism. It does not strive to create an entirely new linguistic structure; contemporary trends point out to finding a mode of writing that would allow the feminine to enter discourse, as opposed to previous attempts to neutralize the difference in writing. Of course, it is important to consider what is meant by the term "feminine" – this issue is at the center of interest for the framework of this thesis, and will therefore be dealt with in the following section.

1.2. "Female," "Feminine" and "Feminist"

Any discussion of *l'écriture féminine* would be incomplete without specifying the difference between "female," "feminine" and "feminist." Toril Moi formulated a rather compact theoretical explanation for each term – "female" refers to biological disposition, "feminine" to its social construct, and "feminist" to a political stance.[17] Practical applications of these terms as well as their mutual implications are not all that straightforward. Although the terms are often considered complementary, being born as "female" does not automatically imply being "feminine" or a "feminist."

The prevailing anti-essentialist approaches question gender labels of "male" and "female" as well as their socially constructed counterparts, i.e. "masculine" and "feminine." What characteristics are typical for femininity and who determines them? According to Moi, the social construction of "femininity" is a result of patriarchy – on the one hand, it is a set of qualities such as obedience, submissiveness and virtuousness that were welcomed in the public/private domains. On the other hand, femininity in writing is indicated by emotionality, irrationality and the lack of coherence, a set of characteristics scorned upon by the reading as well as the critical public.[18]

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[16] Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction," *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader,* ed. Deborah Cameron (New York: Routledge, 1998) 50.
[17] Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," *The Feminist Reader,* ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 117.
[18] Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" 123-4.

In terms of "French feminism," femininity in writing entails welcoming the difference into discourse and not dwelling on binary oppositions and privileging the One over the Other. Femininity then may exist in men and masculinity in women, an assumption which further complicates the concept of *l'écriture féminine.* Hélène Cixous explained her cautious approach toward the concept in the interview with Christa Stevens:

> First of all, I do not say feminine writing. I talk about femininity in writing, or I use heaps of quotation marks, I speak of "so-called feminine" writing. In any case, femininity – to define it – also exists in men, it does not necessarily exist in women, and so it should return to enclose itself in the history of anatomical difference and of sexes […].[19]

As Cixous illustrated in the passage above, feminine libidinal economy is not necessarily linked to biological sex. Similarly, it is not limited by any set of characteristics, though the representatives of *l'écriture féminine* identified a few features connected to femininity in writing that will be considered in the sections devoted to individual representatives of the movement, and, specifically in relation to works of Sylvia Plath, in the last section of this chapter.

Despite being associated with art rather than politics, writing has the power to "bring to light," i.e. to transform and disrupt pre-established codes and norms embedded in the most basic order of all orders – the order of language. The power over patriarchal linguistic and social structures is among the main subjects of feminist criticism. "Feminism" is then no longer considered a political label associated with the new women's movement in the 1960s; it also includes feminist criticism, a special kind of discourse which reflects the theoretical and critical struggle against patriarchy.[20] Nevertheless, the representatives of *l'écriture féminine* tend to avoid the term "feminist," since it became too associated, using Moi's formulation, with "a bourgeois, egalitarian demand for women to obtain power in the present patriarchal system."[21] In terms of poetics, the term "feminist poetics" is used as a reference to the public dimension in poetry, while discussions of "femininity" in poetry are often reserved for private dimensions of women's lives as well as individualized approaches to literature and art.[22] Correspondingly, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva have distanced themselves from the

[19] Hélène Cixous, *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, ed. Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia UP, 2008) 22.
[20] Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" 117.
[21] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1985) 103.
[22] Mary Carruthers, "Imagining Women: Notes towards a Feminist Poetics," *The Massachusetts Review* 20.2 (1979) 281.

Marxist focus on class-struggle, and tend to describe themselves as "feminocentric" rather than "feminist" writers.

1.3. "French Feminism" in French and American Academic Discourse

In spite of theoretical complexity of terms "female," "feminine" and "feminist," *l'écriture féminine* tends to be associated with "new French feminists," and, more broadly, with "French feminism." It is important to note that there are in fact two lines of "French feminism" – one established in French and the other in American academic discourse.

Imagined as a single movement synonymous with *Mouvement de libération des femmes*, "French feminism" refers to a series of uncoordinated artistic and literary movements that emerged in France in the late 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s. [23] Its characteristics, including the absence of any leading personality as well as the lack of structure, are very similar to those of Women's Liberation Movement in the United States, even to the extent that these two movements are often presented as parallel. In a sense, both lines of thought are complementary, since the French movement provided theoretical foundations for the political concerns of the American intellectuals, and the American version introduced the concept of *l'écriture féminine* beyond French borders by providing up-to-date translations of journal articles by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva in journals such as *Signs*, *Sub-Stance*, and *Diacritic*.

1.4. Theoretical Foundations of *L'Écriture féminine*

As mentioned in the previous section, *l'écriture féminine* is characterized by various theoretical frameworks which combine feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, and which emerged in response to Jacques Lacan's reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis into the study of "libidinal economies," i.e. the ways in which the body and language determine and are determined by social hierarchies.[24] Lacan worked with the assumption that Western linguistic and cultural structures are phallogocentric, i.e. based on the centrality of the phallus as a primary signifier. The classification of the speaking subject as either "feminine" or "masculine" is structured by the speaking subject's relation to the phallus and the Oedipus complex.

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[23] Claire Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in United States Academic Discourse," *Australian Feminist Studies* 11.23 (2010) 19.
[24] Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector,* trans. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1990) vii.

In the Lacanian model of language, symbolic discourse, is put into opposition with semiotic discourse, a pre-Oedipal space in which the child identifies with the pre-Oedipal Mother. The identification with the pre-Oedipal Mother (and, simultaneously, the semiotic order) ends with the discovery of her lack of penis, which makes a child shift his/her attention to the Oedipal Father and enter the symbolic order.[25] Since the oedipal moment inaugurates the sexual difference in relation to the phallus, men and women enter language differently, and Lacan's argument is that women's entry into language is organized by the "lack," referring to the lack of penis and the castration complex.[26] This theory has embraced the image of a society in which language is the property of men.

Although Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva have chosen the Lacanian model of language as their point of departure, they are consistently critiquing its phallogocentric implications. This theory predetermines the image of a society in which authorship is considered to be essentially a male phenomenon, and it often leads to what Nina Baym calls the "female anxiety of authorship."[27] Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva refuse the understanding of "writer" as signifying "assertion" and "woman" as signifying "submission," and propose to break this tradition by incorporating the feminine into discourse – a process which became known as *l'écriture féminine*.[28]

1.5. Representatives of *L'Écriture féminine*

Probably the most widespread definition provided by numerous studies on the works by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva characterizes *l'écriture féminine* as writing through the body which disrupts and transcribes the linguistic and social hierarchy.[29] However, the concept is much more complicated. The next three sub-sections are dedicated to the description of *l'écriture féminine* as envisioned by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, sometimes ironically called the "Holy Trinity" of "French Feminism."

1.5.1. Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous is the most frequently mentioned name in connection to the concept of *l'écriture féminine* thanks to the frequency with which she published her work and her ever-present intellectual interests in challenging the phallogocentric structure of language.

[25] Nina Baym, "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3.1/2 (1984) 54.
[26] Annette Kuhn, "Introduction to Hélène Cixous's 'Castration or Decapitation?'" *Signs* 7.1 (1981) 37.
[27] Baym 47.
[28] Ostriker, "The Thieves" 69.
[29] Cixous, *Reading* vii – viii.

Throughout her career as a writer, her numerous works included recurrent motifs revolving around femininity in writing, first introduced in the form of ironic feminist polemic that could be traced in works such as "The Newly-Born Woman" (1975) and "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), and that gradually shifted toward a mode of lyrical feminine celebration prevalent in works such as those collected in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*.[30]

Cixous experienced firsthand what it means to be a "thief of language," as she confesses in her essay "Coming to Writing": "Everything in me joined forces to forbid me to write. History, my story, my origin, my sex. Everything that constituted my social and cultural self."[31] Cixous appears to be on point with Alicia Suskin Ostriker, an American theorist who claims that masculine discourse is not accommodating to women writers – it tends to present them as muses, but never as creators of art. Ostriker responds to this tendency in connection to American women's poetry:

> Throughout her existence the woman poet has needed to be proven virtuously female to legitimize her vocation as a poet. In the nineteenth century, the genteel poetry and the genteel idea of femininity, which stressed the heart and denied the head, was a perfect glass slipper; those who were not Cinderella had to shed blood to fit it, and these wounds are not healed yet.[32]

Cixous does not feel the need to be "virtuously female" and neither does she allow to become captured within a recognizable literary tradition, in her words, to become "a woman [...] in the bag."[33] For Cixous, being a woman is by no means an obstacle to creation – being born a woman is as much a predisposition for creation as being born a man. Women's creation, like female bodies, is just different (not to be understood as inferior) to men's creation, an opinion that she puts forth in "Coming to Writing":

> And all women feel, in the dark or the light, what no man can experience in their place, the incisions, the birth, the explosion of libido, the ruptures, the losses, the pleasures in our rhythms.[34]

Such a depiction of women's experience, however, is mostly absent or censored in Western culture. Despite the ever-growing number of women writers who keep entering discourse,

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[30] Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Writing Past the Wall, or The Passion According to H.C.," *Coming to Writing and Other Essays,* ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) xvi.
[31] Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 12.
[32] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*: *The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 15.
[33] Deborah Jenson, ed. "Coming to Reading Hélène Cixous," *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 183-4.
[34] Plath, "Coming to Writing" 56.

"with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity [.]"[35] This quote, though coming from the seventies, still gives the impression of actuality, since Cixous keeps emphasizing the need for the kind of language which inscribes femininity that she articulated in "The Laugh of the Medusa":

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence" [...].[36]

Nowadays, "The Laugh of the Medusa" is considered to be a manifesto of *l'écriture féminine*. However, the concept itself is a tough nut to crack for the reading public as well as feminist critics. Some understand *l'écriture féminine* as synonymous to "feminine writing" or "women's writing." This comparison is rather inaccurate, as Cixous (as well as Irigaray and Kristeva) studies mainly texts by male authors (she devoted the subject matter of her doctoral thesis to analyzing the feminine in the works James Joyce) and is well aware of the fact that writing the feminine is not limited to women. Cixous does not attempt to introduce a genre of writing that would represent a reversal of masculine discourse; she rather intends "to let into writing what has always been forbidden up until now, knowing the effects of femininity."[37]

A significant part of this "forbidden" material includes the depiction of women's pleasure (*jouissance*). In her essay "Castration or Decapitation," Cixous compares female sexuality with feminocentric "textuality" and finds interesting connections:

> This is how I would define a feminine textual body: as a female libidinal economy, a regime, energies, a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture. A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there is no closure [...]. There's *tactility* in the feminine text, there's touch, and this touch passes through the ear. Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic.[38]

According to Cixous, female libidinal economy is "cosmic,"[39] and she differentiates *jouissance* from erection and ejaculation. The reflection of *jouissance* in writing produces texts whose structures are circular instead of linear, reflecting women's recurrent cycles. These texts are not bound by time; therefore, feminine texts tend to lack closure and

[35] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976) 878.
[36] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 875.
[37] Cixous, *White Ink* 52.
[38] Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Anette Kuhn, *Signs* 7.1 (1981) 53-4.
[39] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 889.

emphasize heterogeneity of meanings instead of privileging the hierarchy of signs. By implication, reflecting as well locating *jouissance* in writing is compared to being submerged in water:

> Sinking into your own night, being in touch with what comes out of my body as with the sea, accepting the anguish of submersion. Being of a body with the river all the way to the rapids rather than with the boat, exposing yourself to this danger – this is a feminine pleasure. Sea you return to the sea, and rhythm to rhythm. And the builder: from dust to dust through his erected monuments.[40]

Similarly, Cixous compared the process of women's writing to giving birth, a text being a woman writer's child, and her ink white in color to resemble mother's milk. By writing, a woman writer reaches into the source of her femininity located within her body and, metaphorically, gives birth to herself.

By implication, writing is presented as a way of asserting life and avoiding death. Cixous defines it as "a way of leaving no pace for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss."[41] Like *jouissance* as the sexual instinct, the death-drive as the instinct associated with one's ego may motivate women to write, since writing asserts one's subjectivity and presence, and in the case of melancholia (which differs from mourning by the fact that "[t]he object has perhaps not actually died, but has been lost as an object of love […]"[42]), it may enable one to identify the source of one's suffering: "With one hand, suffering, living, putting your finger on pain, loss. But there is the other hand: the one that writes."[43] By repeatedly attempting to locate the source of suffering and identifying the forces which threaten to obliterate the writer's ego, death may be reduced to an empty trope which gives room to the assertion and celebration of life.[44]

1.5.2. Luce Irigaray

Luce Irigaray shares much of her background with both Cixous and Kristeva, but her focus is broader – her theoretical works contain extensive references to continental philosophy, Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacanian theory of language. In her most well-known study, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Irigaray questions the foundations of

[40] Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 57.
[41] Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 3.
[42] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol. XIV, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) 245.
[43] Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 8.
[44] Emma Jones, "'Silence of another order': Negativity Trope in the Late Poems of Sylvia Plath," *Sydney Studies in English* 28.1 (2002) 86.

Western philosophy while using psychoanalytic models as her frameworks. The book presented the metaphor of the speculum (a medical mirror used for inspecting the vagina) that introduced circularity into *l'écriture féminine* as well as Western philosophical and linguistic discourse, blurring the boundaries of phallogocentric order.[45]

In her other works, e.g. *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985)*, Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1990) and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), Irigaray is not preoccupied strictly by femininity in writing; she rather examines the notions of subjectivity and identity. For Irigaray, identity is inherently relational, i.e. our consciousness is mediated by the body and the relation to other embodied subjects.[46] It is also inherently sexual; therefore, all Derridian assumptions about gender-neutral unconscious origins of language are deemed false.[47]

In phallogocentric culture, such relational identification is complicated by the unequal entrance of the sexes into discourse – the One (the masculine) defines oneself in opposition to the Other (the feminine). The structure of language is therefore prevalently oedipal, and is "structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which doesn't symbolize the woman's relation to her mother."[48] Correspondingly, the feminine is silenced or erased from discourse:

> When a girl begins to talk, she is already unable to speak of/to herself. Being exiled in man's speech, she is already unable to auto-affect. Man's language separates her from her mother and from other women, and she speaks it without speaking in it.[49]

Sexual liberation, according to Irigaray, goes hand in hand with linguistic transformation. Therefore, women must acknowledge their difference instead of obliterating themselves in neutrality to obtain a subjective status in discourse.

Her assumption is explored in detail in *This Sex Which Is Not One.* In this book, Irigaray is preoccupied with women's pleasure that, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is defined by "lack," "atrophy" and "penis envy." It constitutes the core of Western culture, and represents

> *a defensive symptom protecting the woman from the political, economic, social, and cultural condition that is hers* at the same time that it prevents her from contributing effectively to the transformation of her allotted fate. "Penis envy" translates woman's

[45] Kelly Ives, *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: The Jouissance of French Feminism* (Maidstone: Crescent Moon Publishing, 2013) 96.
[46] Johanet Alice Kriel, *Imagining the Madwoman*, MA Thesis (Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2011) 12.
[47] Eleanor H. Kyukendall, "Introduction to 'Sorcerer Love,' by Luce Irigaray," *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992) 60.
[48] Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous* 16.
[49] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 101.

> resentment and jealousy at being deprived of the advantages, especially the sexual advantages, reserved for men alone: "autonomy," "freedom," "power," and so on; but it also expresses her resentment at having been largely excluded, as she has been for centuries, from political, social, and cultural responsibilities.[50] [original emphasis]

The insufficient understanding of women's sexuality is encoded in language, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis:

> As Freud admits, the beginnings of the sexual life of a girl child are so "obscure," so "faded with time," that one would have to dig down very deep indeed to discover beneath the traces of this civilization, of this history, the vestiges of a more archaic civilization that might give some clue to woman's sexuality. That extremely ancient civilization would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language […]."[51]

For Irigaray, the conception of love and desire in Western philosophy is "deeply masculinist."[52] In predominantly masculine discourse, the clitoris as a truncated version of the penis, "is not comparable to the noble phallic organ, or a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse,"[53] in other words, it becomes "a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing."[54]

As a result of women's supposed castration complex, Irigaray claims, there is "no recourse other than melancholia."[55] In response to the erasure of female desire in discourse and the consequent inclination toward melancholia, Irigaray advocates of the idea of women's sex as "two lips which embrace each other continually."[56] Women's sexuality as well as the signs inscribed into discourse via femininity are at least double, or, more likely, plural, as Irigaray implied in her statement: "[W]oman has sex organs more or less everywhere."[57] Correspondingly, women's language is very diversified and elusive of symbols and fixed meanings. Rejecting linearity in language is not limited to hierarchy of signs; Irigaray stands in opposition to linear conception of time in language, specifically to artificial dating as a way of measuring time – such an approach speaks of privileging *his*tory while obliterating *her*story in Western discourse.

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[50] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 51.
[51] Irigaray, *This Sex* 25.
[52] Kyukendall 62.
[53] Irigaray, *This Sex* 23.
[54] Irigaray, *This Sex* 23.
[55] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell UP, 1985) 66.
[56] Ives 96.
[57] Irigaray, *This Sex* 28.

1.5.3. Julia Kristeva

Unlike Cixous, who focuses mainly on the poetic domain of language, and Irigaray, who uses psychoanalytical frameworks, Kristeva assumes semiotics as the starting point in her study of libidinal economies in literature and art. Her early works, for example, "The System and the Speaking Subject" and "Word, Dialogue and Novel" that were included in the collection of early texts called *Séméiotiké* (1969), present her reflections on writing and history, and explore the ways in which the emphasis on the vertical order of signs and linear history could be replaced by the non-representational understanding of writing.[58] Her theory is therefore that of marginality rather than femininity, however, some of her later works (e.g. "About Chinese Women," "Stabat Mater," "Women's Time" and *Polylogue*) present a concise examination of old codes and their influence on the speaking subject.[59] Kristeva's theoretical exploration of discourse of marginality is therefore complementary to Cixous' lyrical and sometimes even cryptic explorations of discourse of femininity as well as Irigaray's multi-leveled study of discourse of subjectivity.

To elaborate on the term "discourse of marginality," Kristeva's position appears to be parallel to that of Cixous and Irigaray – all three thinkers agree on the point that women's entrance into language is hindered by numerous obstacles. Instead of considering herself a thief of language, though, Kristeva prefers to see herself a stranger to language, a position already implied by her position as a linguist:

> To work on language, to labour in the *materiality* of that which society regards as a means of contact and understanding, isn't that at one stroke to declare oneself a stranger/foreign [*étranger*] to language?[60] [original emphasis]

Kristeva begins her analysis of linguistic structures by considering Lacan's statement: "[W]hat the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language."[61] This statement tends to be interpreted as perpetuating the homogeneity of meaning, stemming from Lacan's version of the Saussurian sign, consisting of the signifier *over* the signified rather than the signifier *and* the signified.[62] For this reason, Kristeva prefers Lacan's later reformulation of his statement as "Language is what we try to know about the

[58] Toril Moi, ed. "Introduction," *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 4.
[59] Moi, "Introduction" 5.
[60] Julia Kristeva, quoted in Toril Moi, ed. "Introduction," *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 3.
[61] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* Book XX, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998) 65.
[62] Shuli Barzilai, "Borders of Language: Kristeva's Critique of Lacan," *PMLA* 106.2 (1992) 294.

function of *lalangue.*"[63] This version presupposes the heterogeneity of meaning, since it is more partial for duality of language (which Kristeva characterized as the act of signification, the representation of the symbolic and of knowledge) and *lalangue* (the representation of the semiotic, and the realm beyond knowledge).

For Kristeva, the pre-Oedipal (i.e. the semiotic and pre-verbal) phase as the phase of *jouissance* as well as the location of one's death-drive. For Kristeva, the death-drive is identified with one's wish to obliterate oneself, to dissolve one's own identity and to figuratively return to the maternal body. The object of the death-drive therefore does not need to be sought out by women writers; it is to be found in the maternal.[64] However, she does not attempt to identify the feminine with the obliteration of one's ego; she rather emphasizes the fact that entering the symbolic stage does not forbid one from re-entering the semiotic stage, an act which distorts the notion of meaning as homogeneous.[65] In her contribution to the fourth volume of *Interpreting Lacan,* Kristeva writes:

> Not only through the different *figures* or *spaces* made by those signs which resemble linguistic signs, but also through *other elements* […] which, although always already caught in the web of meaning and signification, are not caught in the same way as the two-sided units of the Saussurean sign and even less so in the manner of linguistico-logical categories.[66] [original emphasis]

Kristeva also proposes the way in which the semiotic modality could be re-attained, and that is through one's engagement with poetic language, which is in its nature anti-hierarchical and trans-linguistic. Being full of "empty" signifiers, it allows the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious, which results in the production of multiple meanings rather than a single symbolic meaning:

> The very concept of sign, which presupposes a vertical (hierarchical) division between signifier and signified, cannot be applied to poetic language – by definition an infinity of pairings and combinations.[67]

The semiotic chora, which particularly thrives in poetic language in forms of asyntactical and analogical constructions, echolalia, ellipses, alternating intonations and gestures, is immensely valuable for the psychoanalytic interpretations of texts by women.[68]

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[63] Julia Kristeva, "Within the Microcosm of the 'Talking Cure'," *Interpreting Lacan* Vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 34.
[64] Kriel 95.
[65] Kristeva, "Within the Microcosm" 34.
[66] Kristeva, "Within the Microcosm" 37.
[67] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," *The Kristeva Reader,* ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 40.

Although Kristeva opts for a revolution within symbolic language, she does it very deliberately, having her doubts about the notion of *l'écriture féminine* as well as the existence of any example of truly "feminine" writing.[69] Her main complaint seems to concern the search for the essential nature of womanhood. For Kristeva, there is no "essential woman."[70] As opposed to Cixous, Kristeva prefers to view sex as an attitude rather than biological predisposition, and this attitude shapes a woman as a "subject-in-process" [*sujet-en-procès*], a subject which continuously constructs and deconstructs itself.[71] By these means, the movement of discourse is ensured, and development of language is ensured as well. Kristeva sees the potential for liberation in this position, which does not produce fixed subjects, and thus encourages the systematic challenge of the masculine discourse rather than the introduction of the entirely new and exclusively feminine form.[72]

1.5.4. Other Representatives

The number of representatives of "French feminism" is not limited to Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. However, due to its theoretical and discursive fragmentation, the boundaries of "French feminism" are rather fluid, as Kelly Ives pointed out:

> The boundaries of the "French feminism" are [...] strangely constructed: some men fall within its definition, as do women who do not call themselves feminists, but who have always called themselves feminists are excluded.[73]

Ives's words illustrate not only the fluidity of the boundaries, but also at least shaky grounds of the paradigm between "French feminism" and *l'écriture féminine.* Monique Wittig's inclusion into "French feminism" and her simultaneous exclusion from the *l'écriture féminine* movement is a direct illustration of Ives' words. Wittig's use of Marxist vocabulary, which tends to be associated with American rather than French feminist criticism, causes her frequent exclusion from the aesthetic framework that encompasses Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. Similarly, her theoretical approach is also at odds with the other representatives, since her aim is to *deconstruct* the difference between male and female sentences and thus

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[68] Kristeva, "Within the Microcosm" 37-8.
[69] Ives 41-42.
[70] Ives 69.
[71] Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'Écriture féminine*," *The New Feminist Criticism,* ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1986) 363.
[72] Jones, "Writing the Body" 363.
[73] Ives 15-6.

introduce neutrality into discourse, a position opposed by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, who concentrate on letting the difference manifest itself in discourse.[74]

To further elaborate on the list of representatives, one could name Annie Leclerc, a French theorist and an author of *Parole de femme* (1974). As opposed to Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, Leclerc is not so well-known to American discourse, probably due to the shortage of available English translations of her work. American discourse includes theorists such as Carolyn Burke and Elaine Marks, Toril Moi, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Jane Gallop.

1.6. Limitations and Misconceptions

Despite being introduced in the 1970s, *l'écriture féminine* is perceived as full of contradictions and controversies, to the point that some do not hesitate to describe it as anti-theoretical and, ironically, anti-feminist. The description of *l'écriture féminine* as anti-theoretical may be a result of distinctive writings of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, which are typical for their inconsistency of style. Cixous, in particular, tends to break from the traditional literary criticism in favor of confessional modes and lyrical ways of writing that avoid the formulation of definitions and offer a limited number of possibilities for practical application.[75] On more than one occasion, she was accused of being too poetic (and sometimes downright elusive) and of contradicting herself. Cixous' approach is thoroughly subjective and emotional; therefore, outside of Cixous' seminars, its validity and the possibility of its analytical application may be – and often is – questioned.

Besides the question whether *l'écriture féminine* could be considered a consistent literary theory, it is also questionable whether it could be considered a *feminist* literary theory. Putting aside the previous discussion about the problematic nature of the label "feminist" in connection to "French feminism," there is still a question whether *l'écriture féminine* has any liberating effect for women, or any kind of practical application whatsoever. Jones in her article "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'Écriture féminine*" asks the same question:

> Does a celebration of the Maternal versus the Patriarchal make the same kind of sense, or any sense, to white, middle-class women who are fighting to maintain the right to abortion, to black and Third World women resisting enforced sterilization, to women in subsistence-farming economies where the livelihood of the family depends on the

[74] Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 76.
[75] Ives 28.

> work of every child who is born and survives? [...] I wonder again whether one libidinal voice, however nonphallocentrically defined, can speak to the economic and cultural problems of all women.[76]

To answer Jones' question, the feminist critique of language most probably cannot speak to all women. The very term *l'écriture féminine*, which includes the French word for "writing," suggests that it is a part of artistic and literary movement which involves primarily educated women, particularly those belonging to Western intelligentsia.

Although the movement does not attempt to address a wide spectrum of women around the world, it is not accurate to claim that its representatives do not assume any political stance. There are numerous political, economic and ethical issues which preoccupy Irigaray, e.g. an access to birth control, abortion rights and equality in wages. These are just a few issues connected with relational differences; however, they significantly influence women's access to culture. Continuing with Kristeva, the theorist assumes the linguistic point of view and views language as "the starting-point for a new kind of thought on politics and the subject […]."[77] Cixous, to make the list complete, provided an eloquent answer to Louis de Rambures' question concerning politics in relation to *l'écriture féminine:*

> On the one hand, from a critical reading of the textual productions that make up authority, a reading I endeavour to carry to the level of imaginary structures, where writing, when it avoids contemplating its contradictions and contents itself with the shelter of the real, there, in its house of paper, serves ideology and fabricates prestige more than sense. So much so that in the majority of cases, the "writer" (a worrying, misleading word, that returns to the one whose aim is to be read and who holds the right to be believed, to make law and morals, in the name of some thought, in the name of an image) in fact intensifies the symbolic power I would like women to tackle in writing. On the other hand, from an analysis of the connection that develop between the terms of writing – power – women – politics – taking into account the contradictions I myself have to deal with in practice.[78]

Knowing the effects of the symbolic power of language, Cixous considers avoiding any political implications impossible. Nevertheless, the ever-present boundary between feminist theory and practice seems even more problematic in connection to *l'écriture féminine* than to any other feminist theory. Such complications led Nina Baym to consider *l'écriture féminine*

[76] Jones, "Writing the Body" 371.
[77] Moi, "Introduction" 4.
[78] Cixous, *White Ink* 53.

as an anti-feminist theory. Her primary criticism concerns the reliance of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva on Lacan's reworking of the Oedipus complex, juxtaposing the Oedipal father for the pre-Oedipal mother, an approach which (in Baym's opinion) further limits the possibility of practical application.[79]

Another feature, pointed out by Trinh Minh-ha and Sara Mills, involves the supposed inclination toward essentialism, which is in contrast with contemporary inclination toward anti-essentialist tendencies. The qualities of language proposed by certain feminists as authentically "feminine" look suspiciously like the qualities associated with femininity in *anti-feminist* discourse (i.e. feminine writing as being closer to the body, therefore less rational and structured on the basis of non-linear principles).[80] As such, *l'écriture féminine* faces the risk of value-judgment and imposing stereotypical representations on women.

1.7. *L'Écriture féminine* in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

L'Écriture féminine as an (anti-)feminist (anti-)theory proves itself to be difficult to grasp, and even more difficult to apply. The application of French literary criticism to the English and American poetry is often regarded with suspicion – more often than not, the visionary nature of "French feminism" is put in contrast with the pragmatic approach favored by Anglo-American feminists. Nevertheless, *l'écriture féminine* encourages both women writers and women readers to "unbind" themselves from constrains of the established order, and to grant them agency in both the writing and the reading processes.

Although it may be considered at least partially visionary, the concept of *l'écriture féminine* is not to be taken as non-systematic – there are many recurrent issues, some of which frequent the poetry of Sylvia Plath (though not all of them are Plath-specific – some are typical for the twentieth-century American women's poetry). These will be considered in the next three chapters whose individual sections include considerations of the series of themes, such as the concept of the female body and its role in the formation of women's identity, the connection between women's fertility and creativity and poetic explorations of living and dying, all situated within Plath's continuum that, supposedly, documents the development of her poetic voice.

Special emphasis will be put on Plath's strategies which correspond with selected features of *l'écriture féminine,* i.e. the tendency to conflate the female body with the body of the poem, the engagement in referential chains which are motivated by the workings of

[79] Baym 54.
[80] Cameron 8.

jouissance and the death-drive, its primarily "auditory logic"[81] and the position on the margins of language, and, last but not least, the gradual shift toward cyclical nature of women's time (as opposed to the linear conception of time, characterized by artificial dating, privileged by Western discourse), reflected in circular structures of many of her poems. The following chapters will also illustrate Plath's attempts to ensure heterogeneity of meanings, which is often reflected by the poet's inclination toward multiplicity, plurality and fluidity.

[81] Jones, "Silence of another order" 90.

2. The Female Prometheus Bound: Plath's Early Poetry

Plath's poetry has not always been viewed as a continuum. To this day, some analysts deny the continuity between the early and the late work to the point of Plath becoming synonymous with *Ariel.* Paradoxically, the poet was not unknown before the publication of her posthumous collection. Several of her "juvenilia," i.e. the earliest uncollected poetry, were published in magazines and journals, such as *Seventeen, Mademoiselle, Ladies Home Journal* and *The New Yorker.* Additionally, she had her debut collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960)*,* published a few years before her death.

When critics devote their attention to this portion of Plath's work, they do so mainly for the sake of comparison, emphasizing the break in tone occurring after *The Colossus*. In relation to this break, Plath's early poetry is described as a product of the bound female Prometheus – as relying on past tradition, thematically as well as stylistically. The second chapter of this thesis is then devoted to the period of Plath's "apprenticeship,"[82] spanning approximately from 1956 till 1960, and culminating with the publication of *The Colossus.* It observes the poet's early attempts at encoding feminine meanings and transforming poetic forms, a stage in which the female Prometheus learns to identify whoever bound her.

2.1. "Thesaurus open on her knee"[83]: Plath the Artisan

To elaborate on the biographical as well as creative circumstances connected to Plath's early poetry, one may consider the origins of the "apprenticeship" metaphor when used in relation to Plath's work. Although the specific expression comes from Tim Kendall's study of Plath, one may as well find its links to Hughes' introduction to Plath's *The Collected Poems:* "Her attitude to her verse was artisan-like: if she couldn't get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy."[84] Hughes thus created Plath's image as an artisan rather than an artist, and this duality was further reinforced by another commentary of Hughes', this time concerning his role as the editor of Plath's work, which he included into his "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems." Here he created the image of Plath with the "[t]hesaurus open on her knee," [85] which inadvertently supported the

[82] Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001) 1.
[83] Ted Hughes, quoted in Steven Gould Axelrod and Nan Dorsey, "The Drama of Creativity in Sylvia Plath's Early Poems," *Pacific Coast Philology* 32.1 (1997) 77.
[84] Ted Hughes, ed. "Introduction," *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 13.
[85] Axelrod and Dorsey 77.

formulation of the central dichotomies, i.e. the dichotomy between Plath the Artisan and Plath the Artist, as well as the dichotomy between Plath's early poems, which, using Suzanne Juhasz's formulation, were "carefully plotted with the thesaurus," and the later ones, which "came more directly from inside [Plath]."[86] These dichotomies repudiate all instances of a transformative approach on Plath's part during her supposed "apprenticeship." This theory was further supported by Hughes' declaration that his wife's "authentic" voice emerged no earlier than in 1959, when they were staying in Yaddo and Plath was pregnant with their first child.[87]

Linda Wagner-Martin argues against Hughes' assumption, claiming that "[a]s early as 1956, even before she met Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath had begun trying to write poems that spoke more colloquially. She had come to think of the poet as song-maker, not as scholar with her head buried in books."[88] Wagner-Martin's argument appears legitimate, especially when put in relation to Plath's journals. Despite her early approach being described as rather mechanical and forced even by Plath herself, the poet was looking for originality as well as literary autonomy since the beginning of her career. In her journal entry from July 1951, Plath confesses:

> My trouble? Not enough free thinking, fresh imagery. Too much subconscious clinging to clichés and downtrodden combinations. Not enough originality. Too much blind worship of modern poets and not enough analysis and practice.[89]

The poet depicted herself as striving for new, more original forms of expression which would enable her to encode her feminine self into the poems. Several early pieces of poetry suggest long bouts of experimentation on all fronts, some of which were confirmed even by Hughes in his introduction to *The Collected Poems*: "[Plath's] evolution as a poet went rapidly through successive moults of style, as she realized her true matter and voice."[90] Even in the early stages of her career, Plath engaged in exploring and transforming thematic and linguistic constraints.

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[86] Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 101.
[87] Marjorie Perloff, "Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 115.
[88] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986) 166.
[89] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 88.
[90] Hughes 16.

2.2. "What ceremony of words could patch the havoc?"[91]: Themes and Style

Plath's pre-1960 poems represent a challenge for any kind of categorization due to their extensive selection of themes, images and forms. What they have in common is their engagement in a series of contradictions – Plath's early period is a period of searching for new images while at least partially relying on the established binaries, of the taste for experimenting while accommodating herself within prescript poetic structures, and of being enslaved by the conflicting desire to either conform or rebel against social and literary norms.[92]

To elaborate on these assumptions, the pre-1960 section of *The Collected Poems* (i.e. the poems written between 1956 and 1960, some of which were published in Plath's debut *The Colossus*) contains forms and subject matter which link Plath to her predecessors, such as W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas and Theodore Roethke.[93] There are also poets such as Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie, Archibald MacLeish and e. e. cummings named as sources of her early inspiration in terms of both formal structure and thematic focuses.[94] Similarly, one may not omit the influence of Plath's husband – poems like "Ode for Ted," "Pursuit," "Faun" and "Song for a Summer Day" are written, in Axelrod and Dorsey's words, in "a Hughesian style on Hughesian themes."[95]

Plath's naturalization in England influenced her creative efforts; therefore, her early poetry includes poems depicting landscapes and architecture in the manner passed down by the Romantic and the Symbolist tradition.[96] To provide a few examples, one could mention "Conversation among the Ruins," "Winter Landscapes, with Rooks," "Bucolics," "November Graveyard," "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," "Hardcastle Crags," "Two Views of Withens" and "Watercolors of Grantchester Meadows." These poems integrate the "dynamic interchange between the mood of the perceiver and the mood of nature."[97] As such, they foreshadow the centrality of the self, yet they do not analyze physiological processes of the body and inner workings of the female psyche on the same scale as her transitional and later poetry.

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[91] Sylvia Plath, "Conversation among the Ruins," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 21.
[92] Kendall 49.
[93] Kendall 1.
[94] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 88.
[95] Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) 195.
[96] Kendall 101.
[97] Kendall 25.

To illustrate this conception with examples, one could consider "Bucolics," one of the earliest poems included in *The Collected Poems*, besides juvenilia. The poem's imagery, consisting of fields, cattle and flowers, appears slightly unoriginal, especially when compared to Plath's later poems, in which she does not hesitate to create startling and seemingly incompatible combinations to create unconventional clusters of imagery. The first two stanzas present the central pair of lovers, who are depicted as being in unity with each other as well as the rural landscape: "Mayday: two came to field in such wise: / 'A daisied mead,' each said to each, / So were they one; so sought they couch, / Across barbed stile, through flocked brown cows.[98] In this stanza, the landscape reflects the mood of the lovers, and is intentionally harmonious and static, an impression further conveyed by the third stanza:

Below: a fen where water stood;
Aslant: their hill of stinging nettle;
Then, honor-bound, mute grazing cattle;
Above: leaf-wraithed white air, white cloud.[99]

As soon as "the sun turn[s] pale for warm,"[100] however, the mood of the poem is unexpectedly reversed. The unsuspecting reader is suddenly presented with dark images and harsh words such as "harm," "cruel nettles," "wound," "pain," "worm-girt" and "smart."[101] The loss of unity is implied not only by its central figures, but also by the landscape and the body of the poem.

Similar development could be traced in another early poem, which is titled "Conversation among the Ruins." In the first stanza, Plath presents the reader with rather unoriginal scenery bound by the Classical ideal of beauty:

Through the portico of my elegant house you stalk
With your wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit
And the fabulous lutes and peacocks, rending the net
Of all decorum which holds the whirlwind back.[102]

The encounter of two opposing forces, the harmonious femininity and the barbaric masculinity, brings significant changes to the scenery – from the second line onward, the Classical scenery is disrupted by masculine transformative force, which is presented as barbaric and downright destructive, and which radically changes the setting. The imagery

[98] Sylvia Plath, "Bucolics," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 23.
[99] Plath, "Bucolics" 24.
[100] Plath, "Bucolics" 24.
[101] Plath, "Bucolics" 24.
[102] Plath, "Conversation among the Ruins" 21.

becomes darker and has an almost Gothic feeling to it, e.g. "bleak light," "stormy eye," "daunting witch," etc.[103] Words themselves become harsher, since some of them rely on rhotic sounds, such as the expression "rooks croak."[104]

Other poems, such as "Tale of a Tub," "Street Song," "Landowners," "Poems, Potatoes" and "Yaddo: The Grand Manor" offer landscapes which are in contrast with the natural and prevalently Romantic ones. In these poems, the poet's imagery as well as her formal approach may remind the reader of *Ariel* poems, in which the domestic setting loses the impression of safety and is seen in new, often startling (and sometimes even horrifying) ways. In "Tale of a Tub," for example, the otherwise well-known setting upsets the speaker:

> Just how guilty we are when the ceiling
> reveals no cracks that can be decoded? When washbowl
> maintains it has no more holy calling
> than physical ablution, and the towel
> dryly disclaims that troll faces lurk
> in its explicit folds? Or when the window
> blind with steam, will not admit the dark
> which shroud our prospects in ambiguous shadow?[105]

The cold, chromium-based surroundings reflect the "starkness" and "accuracy" of one's nudity, and they make the speaker's body appear as "the stranger in the lavatory mirror."[106] There is neither a higher principle nor a mythical scheme present in the room as well as the poem, and its unmasked simplicity which leaves the speaker's nudity unconcealed becomes a source of very negative feelings that are reflected in the distressed tone of the poem.

As for formal features, Plath's early poems are well-known for their reliance on complex yet conventional poetic patterns passed down from her predecessors – she kept writing villanelles ("Mad Girl's Love Song"), terza rimas ("Sow," "Lorelei," "Full Fathom Five," etc.), rime royales ("The Eye-Mote") and couplets ("The Thin People"). Plath's overuse of fixed subjects and prescribed forms soon became the main source of her worries, as he confessed in her journal entry from February 25, 1956:

> [U]ntil I make something tight and riding over the limits of sweet sestinas and sonnets, away from the reflection of myself in Richard's eyes and the inevitable narrow bed,

[103] Plath, "Conversation among the Ruins" 21.
[104] Plath, "Conversation among the Ruins" 21.
[105] Sylvia Plath, "Tale of a Tub," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 24.
[106] Plath, "Tale of a Tub" 24.

too small for a smashing act of love, until then, they can ignore me and make up pretty jokes.[107]

Here, like in many other entries, Plath admitted that her poetic language was rather papery and that she was sometimes overly enthusiastic in her use of figures of speech. Bit by bit, she attempted to move away from the prescriptive structure, and strived toward versatility which made her later poetry so famous.

Eventually, her early creative efforts proved to be fruitful, since they gave birth to poems whose structures may be considered inter-referential, atemporal and circular. Besides "Metaphors," a poem that will be considered in the section dealing with the issues of women's fertility and creativity, there are poems such as "Spider," "Wreath for a Bridal" and "Rhyme." The last mentioned is a very interesting example of Plath's early work with circular structures that contain numerous references to round shapes. The reference to a goose whose round belly is "[h]oneycombed with golden eggs,"[108] is reflected in the body of the poem that – literally as well as figuratively – gives birth to itself, a process compared to laying eggs, or lack thereof. The abundance of voiced velar plosives in "goose," "gut," "golden eggs," "hags," "ogle," "grin," "[j]angling," "great […] bags," "grits," "grain," "begs," "rogue" and "dregs"[109] presents yet another link to circularity – the manner of articulation of the / g / sound is occlusive, i.e. it is produced by obstructing airflow in the vocal tract, an act which may convey the image of shrinking and expanding circles. In this sense, "Rhyme" is very similar to Plath's transitional poem "Crossing the Water" that will be considered in the next chapter.

2.3. "God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly"[110]: Body and Identity

The central conflict between the conventional as well as unconventional imagery and structures is reflected in several conflicts permeating Plath's early poetry. The pre-1960 section of *The Collected Poems* includes many poems that reflect the poet's struggle for self-definition hindered by the unconscious clinging to symbolic structures, binary oppositions and labels. As an early 1950s passage from Plath's journals suggests, "I" represents a crucial yet confusing signifier for Plath:

[107] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 208.
[108] Sylvia Plath, "Rhyme," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 50.
[109] Plath, "Rhyme" 50.
[110] Sylvia Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 116.

> But I am I now; and so many other millions are so irretrievably their own special variety of "I" that I can hardly bear to think of it. I: how firm a letter; how reassuring the three strokes: one vertical, proud and assertive, and then the two short horizontal lines in quick, smug succession. The pen scratches on the paper ... I ... I ... I ... I ... I.[111]

The masculine discourse appears to weigh on Plath's unconscious. The reference to vertical and horizontal brush strokes may convey the predominantly masculine conception of the self – in accordance with the psychoanalytical approach, the vertical line would suggest the focus on erection that symbolizes the hierarchical order of signs. Similarly, "the two short horizontal lines in quick, smug succession"[112] suggest the linear conception of historical time, preferred by Western discourse.

To identify her linguistic constraints, Plath took upon the challenging task of working with heavily symbolic structures like those of Classical mythology. Myths represent a convenient framework for the process of self-assertion, and their purpose in Plath's poetry is at least threefold – for one, they enable the poet to tone down the personal element in her poetry. Judith Kroll, the author of *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath,* comments on Plath's strategy as follows:

> Because a mythic system accommodates the personal element, the voice of her poetry is detached from the personal in a sense that it is not in the "confessional" poets, whose strategy depends partly upon convincing the reader of a lack of such detachment […] She has a vision which is complete, self-contained, and whole, a vision of a mythic totality, which such poets as Lowell and Sexton do not have.[113]

Plath's strife for completeness and unity; however, proved to be rather problematic, due to the supposed absence of women in masculine discourse. How could women writers create unified images of themselves if they are denied access to language? This question brings into question the second purpose of myths in Plath's poetry.

On the one hand, myths, the so-called "sanctuaries of language,"[114] provide women with a sense of identity by containing stable models for identification. On the other hand, they often served as foundations for various biological arguments that encoded themselves into Western cultural consciousness. Therefore, they represent convenient frameworks for

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[111] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 34.
[112] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 34.
[113] Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 3.
[114] Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language" 69.

identification as well subversion. The latter constitutes a third purpose in Plath's poetry, as Gill paraphrases Kroll:

> Plath's engagement with mythology and construction of a myth of her own is a strategy of displacement which reveals, while it attempts to hide, her actual dissociation from her own subjectivity and experience.[115]

Plath's approach may be illustrated on her poem "Electra on the Azalea Path." Electra is one of the central images of phallogocentric discourse that governs women's entrance into language. The construction of women's identities is realized not by acknowledging their difference, but by acknowledging their phallic inferiority based on the Electra complex. The realm of the symbolic, order and abstraction could be attained once the daughter has rejected the maternal in favor of the paternal. Women writers then tend to be depicted as seeking their fathers' approval as well as creative potency to advance their ambitions, but their attempts are often considered futile – they are condemned to emulate their mothers and therefore are unable to master symbolic discourse.

In the poem, Plath depicted her visit to Otto Plath's grave in 1959.[116] Instead of engaging in the Confessional mode of writing, she endows the deeply personal experience with a mythical frame to transform it into an exercise at self-definition. The process of self-affirmation of the speaking subject (the poem's "I" is an amalgamation of Plath herself, a mythical figure and an unnamed fictional daughter) cannot be resolved without reviving the dead father. In this aspect, Plath puts into play a teasing ambiguity concerning autobiographical information by including the reference to Otto Plath's occupation as an entomologist and an author of *Bumblebees and Their Ways.* Similarly, in the line "It was the gangrene ate you to the bone,"[117] Plath tropes the real circumstances of her father's death.

Like the figure of the daughter, the father figure is an object of both mourning and melancholia – the speaker is depicted as both mourning the loss of the loved person as well as wallowing in the surge of melancholy, brought about by the loss of the object of self-affirmation. Her attitude mirrors Freudian psychoanalysis, in which "an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss."[118]

The loss of the father (who is both unnamable and unsignifiable) as well as the speaker's status as an abject opens a void in language.[119] Paradoxically, the speaker attempts

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[115] Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 118.
[116] Kroll 3.
[117] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 117.
[118] Freud 249.
[119] Jill Scott, *Electra after Freud: Myth and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005) 153.

to fill this void with more words, until language gradually exhausts itself and becomes "[her] own blue razor rusting in [her] throat."[120] Such a void, according to Kristeva, occurs at the limits of symbolic discourse and creates the effect, using Shuli Barzilai's formulation, of "a language that gives up."[121] The exhaustion of language is further reinforced by the season of wintering that conveys the impression of fruitlessness and lifelessness, e.g. the speaker spends most of her life in "lightless hibernaculum,"[122] where the bees "sleep out the blizzard,"[123] the hard ground of the graveyard is a space "where no flower / Breaks the soil"[124] and where [t]he artificial red sage does not stir."[125]

The image of desolation is disrupted as soon as the speaker realizes that the father's God-like status is also artificial and self-imposed: "It was the gangrene ate you to the bone / My mother said; you died like any man. / How shall I age into that state of mind?"[126] Her tone suddenly shifts from melancholic to sarcastic and even mocking to ridicule the father-deity: "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father—your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death."[127] In these concluding lines (that may be considered the preludes to Plath's later poems such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy"), the speaker imagines herself as standing in front of her father's gate, and such an image may be interpreted as a metaphor for women poets' demand for entering symbolic discourse that systematically denies them access.

The speaker of "Electra on Azalea Path" does no acquiesce with her inferior role; instead, she decides to shift away from Electra's blind subservience to the father by mimicking the vengeful and unrestrained behavior of the Erinyes – since she must live with the curse of the castration complex, she seeks vengeance by disrupting the father's symbolic status, turning him into an abject and including him into her "lightless hibernaculum."[128] The reference to the hibernaculum is very interesting, since its possible interpretations may contradict the previous assumptions about the speaker's wishes for self-definition. It may be a metaphorical expression for the father's grave as well as, using the formulation by Johanet Alice Kriel, the dark, moist soil [representing] the womb of Mother Earth."[129] The speaker's

[120] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 117.
[121] Barzilai 295.
[122] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 116.
[123] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 116.
[124] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 117.
[125] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 117.
[126] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 117.
[127] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 117.
[128] Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 116.
[129] Kriel 100.

wish for self-affirmation then may be at odds with yet another wish – to return to the maternal body. Looking back at Kristeva's theory of the semiotic, the speaker's desire to be obliterated may enable her to return to the pre-Oedipal mother, the pre-verbal (or even trans-verbal) site of *jouissance.* Motivated by the speaker's death-drive, "hibernaculum" may be a space of *jouissance* as well as death. "Electra on Azalea Path" may therefore be read as a portrait of a girl suffering from the Electra complex, or it may be presented as an attempt at the expulsion of the father figure and the re-assertion of the genealogy of the mother.

2.4. "I'm a riddle in nine syllables"[130]: Fertility and Creativity

Plath's analysis of the "I" signifier does not end with the relation of the female body and identity to the Electra complex; her struggle against the masculine power of definition manifests itself also in the issues of female fertility and creativity. Plath's poems appear as if attempting to reformulate the Western conception of love in which the virginal body is the source of procreation in the name of the father.[131]

In phallogocentric discourse, women's sexual drives, including *jouissance,* are censored and tabooed, and female bodies are turned into passive objects enslaved by the power of the male gaze. To illustrate this conception with a few examples, one could return to "Conversation among the Ruins," in which the male makes his female counterpart "rooted to [his] black look."[132] In "Winter Landscape, with Rooks," and "Bucolics," the masculine figure is disguised as the sun, "an orange cyclops-eye."[133] "Pursuit" presents the male as a panther which stalks the poet down, and "Tale of a Tub" speaks of "the revolted eye."[134] "The Queens Complaint" includes the image of a hulking giant, who casts "[l]ooks fierce and black as rooks."[135] "The Lady and the Earthenware Head" presents the reader with the model head, whose stare is compared to that of "molesting rough boys." [136] Poems such as "Snakecharmer," "Full Fathom Five" and "The Colossus" present the reader with omnipresent, mythical or otherwise god-like male figures.

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[130] Sylvia Plath, "Metaphors," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 116.
[131] Julia Kristeva, "About Chinese Women," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 139.
[132] Plath, "Conversation among the Ruins" 21.
[133] Sylvia Plath, "Winter Landscape, with Rooks," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 21.
[134] Plath, "Tale of a Tub" 25.
[135] Sylvia Plath, "The Queen's Complaint," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 28.
[136] Sylvia Plath, "The Lady and the Earthenware Head," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 69.

In French theory, writing is frequently compared to an act of *jouissance*. As an act of creation, it is symbolically linked to an act of procreation. The depiction of female sexuality, however, tends to be perceived as a subject of taboo in terms of masculine symbolic discourse, and as a result, women's acts of creation are often presented as acts of transgression. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous expressed her wish "that woman would write and proclaim this unique exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs."[137]

For Plath, being subjected to the symbolic father as well as the symbolic husband, for whom she represents a sexual object without having desires of her own, results in one of the most prominent contradictions – that of "[p]assionate, feeling but intellectually inferior woman versus ascetic, intellectual virgin/spinster."[138] It reflects Plath's own conflicting desire to write and at the same time, to get married and have children, a rather fantastic combination in the fifties, as she confessed in her undated journal entry from the early 1950s:

> – After a while I suppose I'll get used to the idea of marriage and children. If only it doesn't swallow up my desires to express myself in a smug, sensuous haze. Sure, marriage is self expression, but if only my art, my writing, isn't just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married. If only I can find him ... the man who will be intelligent, yet physically magnetic and personable. If I can offer that combination, why shouldn't I expect it in a man? –[139]

Plath's inner conflict over creation and procreation is illustrated in "Two Sisters of Persephone." The poem involves the complex and conflicting image of Persephone, who is the Goddess of Spring and, at the same time, the Queen of the Underworld. The Goddess' double identity is embodied in two female figures – on the one hand, there is the first sister who is associated with nature and fertility. This figure is defined by expressions, some of which are connected to various depictions of femininity in lyrical poetry, e.g. "earth," "pollen on bright air," "a bed of poppies," "petaled blood," "sun's blade," and "labor's pride."[140] Her sister, on the other hand, represents intelligence and infertility. Her persona is associated with abstract words and concepts that, due to women's exclusion from the world of science, may be viewed as heavily masculinized, e.g. "problems," "mathematical machine," "time," "sum"

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[137] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 876.
[138] Kriel 11.
[139] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 21.
[140] Sylvia Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 32.

and "enterprise."[141] Overall, the poem neatly categorizes all differences between the sisters, but does not offer any resolution to the conflict.

Another poem from Plath's early phase, "Metaphors," is similar yet different from "Two Sisters of Persephone." The poems share Plath's thematic concerns about the depiction of female desire and fertility in the body of her work, but Plath's strategy is significantly different. Whereas in "Two Sisters of Persephone," the two sisters are put in contrast, neatly breaking the body of the poem in two halves with corresponding imagery, "Metaphors" conflates the body of the speaker with the body of the poem, and the linguistic trope of pregnancy links both literary and figuratively the issues of fertility and creativity.

The first line, "I'm a riddle in nine syllables […]," [142] already positions pregnancy as the central conceit of the poem. Its body consists of nine lines, each of nine syllables, making the poem appear as being pregnant with itself – it reaches into the depths of its own body and pulls out an abundance of inter-linked objects whose main characteristics include the emphasis on roundness/fullness/hugeness (an elephant, "[a] melon strolling on two tendrils,"[143] "fat purse,"[144] "a bag of green apples"[145] and a loaf which is "big with its yeasty rising"[146]). The poem-body uses this series of metaphors to identify the unidentified embryo present within the maternal body that becomes "a means, a stage"[147] for a drama of creation as well as procreation.

2.5. "Father, this thick air is murderous"[148]: Living and Dying

The theme of death, partly stemming from Plath's own depressive states, permeates her poetry from its early stages. The theme of death in *The Colossus,* arguably the most Freudian of Plath's collections, goes hand in hand with the Electra myth, since its speakers are unable to make peace with their father's death. The death of the father figure represents an obstacle in resolving the father-daughter conflict and in the daughter's attempts at self-affirmation. Even if the father figure is absent, the daughter figure still feels stifled by his symbolic power and authority. In many of Plath's poems, the daughter's continuing

[141] Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone" 31.
[142] Plath, "Metaphors" 116.
[143] Plath, "Metaphors" 116.
[144] Plath, "Metaphors" 116.
[145] Plath, "Metaphors" 116.
[146] Plath, "Metaphors" 116.
[147] Plath, "Metaphors" 116.
[148] Sylvia Plath, "Full Fathom Five," *The Collected Poems,*" ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 93.

subservience causes the self-obliteration of her ego, an effect which is presented as a form of metaphorical suicide.[149]

Besides the already analyzed "Electra on Azalea Path," there are numerous poems concerning the issue of death in relation to patriarchal authoritative systems. Among them is "Full Fathom Five," a poem whose title as well as subject matter echoes William Shakespeare's *The Tempest.* The speaker assumes the role of Miranda, a daughter to Prospero who is kept imprisoned on a remote island. The father is in turn disembodied and his spirit is disguised as the ruler of the world underwater as well as the source of the "[o]ld myth of origins / Unimaginable."[150] Being "unimaginable" makes him unreachable for the daughter who does not consider herself a bearer of the symbolic name of the father, as she confesses in the following lines: "I walk dry on your kingdom's border / Exiled to no good."[151] The father's physical (manifested by the sea's power) as well as symbolic power (concentrated "[w]aist down,"[152] referring to the phallus, and rooted in "skulls,"[153] meaning minds as seats of reason, abstraction and symbolic power) contributes to his God-like status that "def[ies] other godhood."[154]

The father's power both impresses as well as oppresses the daughter, who is aware of the father's power to do away with the feminine, arguably represented by the earth:

> To make away with the ground-
> Work of the earth and the sky's ridgepole.
> Waist down, you may wind
> One labyrinthine tangle
> To root deep among knuckles, shinbones,
> Skulls […].[155]

Despite the speaker's negative feelings towards her father, she cannot deny that he is the main source of her inspiration – her "father-sea god-muse."[156] Despite her devotion, she is unable to either locate or join him in the sea, a situation that stems both from the father's premature death as well as his God-like status. In her attempt to join her father in death and, at the same time, to get closer to the source of creative power, the daughter exhibits short periods of almost suicidal fearlessness, as the last stanza may suggest:

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[149] Kriel 99.
[150] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 92.
[151] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 93.
[152] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 93.
[153] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 93.
[154] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 93.
[155] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 93.
[156] Hughes 13.

Your shelled bed I remember.

Father, this thick air is murderous.

I would breathe water.[157]

At this stage, water is associated with the speaker's death-drive, for her attempt at symbolic self-obliteration as well as physical self-destruction, the only means that would allow her connection with the paternal. The speaker is therefore torn between her suicidal urge to join her father and the knowledge that her sacrifice would be futile – for her, the air that she breathes is constantly threatening her with death by drowning. As opposed to Ariel from *The Tempest,* a freed spirit and the singer of "Full Fathom Five," the daughter in Plath's "Full Fathom Five" could reach liberation only through death.

Although "Full Fathom Five" does not seem to offer as much space for subversion as does "Electra on Azalea Path," its consideration in relation to the development of Plath's voice may be essential. Among other aspects, such as the issues of mourning and melancholia and the workings of the death-drive, it illuminates the stage of Plath's creation in which the paternal is privileged over the maternal (Plath's early muses are predominantly male) on the one hand, and which uses the sea (even if identified as a masculine element) as an important metaphor for a source of creative energy on the other.

2.6. "[H]earing my voice lead out blither on ironic structure of the Oedipus"[158]: Chapter Summary

To conclude this chapter, the early stage of Plath's creation is characterized by a series of contradictions – the frequent themes in Plath's poetry, i.e. the female body and identity, women's fertility and creativity and living and dying, are not yet seen in their mutual implications. To an extent, they become binary oppositions, since they are exclusive to one another – possessing the female body is an obstacle to the process of self-identification in the symbolic discourse, women's creativity is hardly located within their bodies but in the absent paternal element, and the wish at self-obliteration and self-destruction does not give way to self-affirmation within the world of living.

However, Plath remains faithful to the contradictory nature of her early poetry, and even at this stage, one could come across several poems that are subversive to the norm. Poems such as "Electra on Azalea Path," "Metaphors" and, to an extent, "Full Fathom Five" feature explorations of masculine structures, early attempts at circular structures and

[157] Plath, "Full Fathom Five" 93.
[158] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 335.

engagement with the maternal. As such, they may be considered preludes to her later works that more consistently engage with *l'écriture féminine*, and that will be considered in the following chapters.

3. Unbinding the Female Prometheus: Plath's Transitional Poetry

Crossing the Water (1971) is a posthumous collection which has a specific position in Plath's continuum. Subtitled *Transitional Poems*, it was prepared by Ted Hughes and supposedly contains poems written between 1960 and 1961 or the early 1962, i.e. the period after the publication of *The Colossus and Other Poems,* and before the publication of *Ariel.* In terms of Plath's timeline, however, the subtitle "transitional" seems rather relative, since no smooth transition occurred between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*, a fact which is reflected in the rather fluid boundary of the whole phase. *Crossing the Water* was completed concurrently with *Winter Trees,* and though it supposedly contains poems from the poet's transitional phase, it was published six years after *Ariel,* which was supposed to close the whole cycle. Furthermore, *Crossing the Water* includes poems such as "Private Ground," which were contemporaneous to those in *The Colossus,* and the poem "Magi" was even included in the *Ariel* manuscript, but was omitted from the published version.

Despite these discrepancies, *Crossing the Water* saw the light a decade before *The Collected Poems.* As such, it filled a thematic and stylistic gap between the two previously published collections, thus contributing to the general idea of the poet's continuum. In addition, it illuminated a crucial stage in the development of her voice, the stage in which Plath truly began to speak like a woman, and in which *l'écriture féminine* began to manifest itself consistently. This chapter will therefore deal with the next stage in the process of unbinding of the female Prometheus.

3.1. "[A]s she realized her true matter and voice"[159]: Plath the Artist

The term "transitional" becomes relevant in terms of the overall thematic focus of the collection. Both its title and subtitle indicate movement, thus reflecting the dynamic period in Plath's life. During two to three years, Plath moved from London to Devon, gave birth to her two children, suffered continuously from poor health and eventually separated from her husband.[160] The rapid pace of these personal changes is reflected in her approach to writing.

If one is willing to temporarily forget all the objections to Hughes' editing (sometimes perceived as appropriating) of Plath's work, one may observe the exceptional way in which

[159] Hughes 16.
[160] Hall 99.

the collection "offers a succession of transitions or 'crossings', from one country to another, one persona to another, one generation to another – and even backwards, as in the move from age to infancy […], and from being to nothing […]."[161] The way in which the collection was conceived reflects in an extraordinary way Plath's continuing quest to achieve her own style. Plath's considerations of the dichotomy between stasis and movement (be it geographical, physical or structural) suggest her continuing desire to move forward, to cross the metaphoric water and reach a "new land" in terms of her poetry. To achieve this, she created a series of transitions to explore the ways in which her works could escape the limitations of language. These transitions, which mark the emergence of Plath the Artist (as opposed to the earlier version of the poet as Plath the Artisan) will be addressed in the following sections.

3.2. "Intolerable vowels enter my heart"[162]: Themes and Style

As was suggested in the previous chapter, *The Colossus* includes extensive depictions of landscapes, whose changes tend to reflect the speaker's psychological processes. Such a description may still be used in relation to *Crossing the Water* – poems such as "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" and "Two Campers in Cloud Country" may be considered a continuation of Plath's strategy of building increasingly ambiguous and fragmented mindscapes out of specific landscapes and sceneries, which become increasingly dynamic. Whereas *The Colossus* featured the central dichotomy between nature and culture (reflected in the contrast between rural and urban/domestic settings), *Crossing the Water* characterizes landscapes according to their vastness and fluidity, as well as their ability to contain numerous transitions, e.g. from personal to political, public to private, present to absent, superficial to profound, and last but not least, from life to death.

These transitions are implied by central images (e.g. water, sky, stars and flowers), which represent the mirror for the speakers of Plath's poems, and which, in many cases, initiate the process of doubling and the formation of multi-referential chains.[163] Her poetic language uses negativity as its organizing principle, creating its own symbolic discourse – the one which uses both *jouissance* and the death-drive as *telos* and poetic language as *logos*. By these means, Plath's poetry manages to combine dreams and primitive rites with learned

[161] Gill 43.
[162] Sylvia Plath, "Event," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 194.
[163] Jones, "Silence of another order" 87.

linguistic traditions and providing one with "an entrance not only to the superficial, but mainly to the more profound levels of [her] clusters of imagery."[164]

Greater profundity is reached not only in terms of imagery, but also in terms of prosody. Plath's technical experimentation with intricate poetic forms came to a halt after the publication of *The Colossus,* a specimen of a heavily formal syllabic poetry. During her transitional phase, Plath attempted to free herself from the "machinelike syllabic death-blow."[165] She initiated this shift by transforming (or even abandoning) forms such as villanelle and rime royal, and by relying on their simplified versions, consisting mostly of tercets and quintets. The end-rhyme scheme tended to be replaced by irregular rhymes, slant rhymes and eye rhymes, which made Plath's poems less organized and more organic. She also discarded majority of ellipses and syntactical inversions (which became identified with her early poetry) for the sake of more natural cadence.[166]

By introducing the changes described above, Plath made the next step in her journey from formality toward versatility, which contributed to the unique character of poems included in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees.* Among attempts at such versatility in *Crossing the Water* is the experimentation with speaking as well as spoken voice. The ambiguity of poetic language is further reinforced by the aesthetic effect of introducing multiple speakers who either conform or diverge from the conventional structures of language. The speaking subject often becomes the source of indeterminate and sometimes even contradictory voices, which may or may not be entirely human – *Crossing the Water* contains Plath's early attempts at ventriloquism, which appears in poems such as "Zoo Keeper's Wife" and "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." Here, Plath uses phenomena from the natural world to voice her anxieties and personal crises.[167]

Foreshadowing the verbal quality of Plath's late poems, her transitional poetry contains instances of spoken voice, vernacular, sound effects and verbalized physical sensations. The delivery of individual lines then appears more authentic and natural; however, the voice in *Crossing the Water* is still very controlled and more written than spoken, especially in comparison to the *Ariel* voice. In John Frederick Nims's words, one yet cannot hear "a real voice in a real body in a real world,"[168] a feature which is associated with Plath's

[164] Sigrid Renaux, "The Syntax of Water, Darkness and Death in Sylvia Plath's *Crossing the Water,*" *Revista Letras* 47.1 (1997) 96.
[165] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 492.
[166] Hall 102.
[167] Gill 55.
[168] John Frederick Nims, "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Technical Analysis," *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium,* ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970) 151-2.

late poetry. At this stage, Nims's assumption appears legitimate, though one could at least detect the presence of the real body within the body of Plath's transitional poetry. Since the body as the vessel of one's self belongs among the central figures of *l'écriture féminine,* it will be explored in detail in the following section.

3.3. "Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire"[169]: Body and Identity

In symbolic discourse, the female body is not as much inscribed as it is circumscribed. The "lack" becomes its primary characteristic, and it determines the unitary nature of the sign of the female body as infertile and devoid of sexual desire. To illustrate the frailty of unitary sings, including the central sign "I," Plath uses the metonymic representation of the self split into body parts. The conventionally unified speaking subject often undergoes the process of doubling or even multiplying, illustrating Kristeva's assumption that the double is a minimal unit of poetic language. Kristeva's double does not work with the Saussurian hierarchical division between the signifier and the signified; instead, it functions as "a multi-determined peak."[170] It allows the heterogeneity of meanings, particularly those which tend to be erased or silenced, to enter discourse.

In accordance with the overall theme of the collection, such multiplying tends to initiate the multi-referential chain comprised of transitions, e.g. the transition from old age into infancy, from presence to absence, and, last but definitely not least, from death into a form of ritual rebirth. Such chain then creates a non-linear *feminine* structure, which is cyclical, elusive of historical time and without closure.

Such an analytical framework could be applied to several poems in *Crossing the Water,* e.g. "In Plaster," "Mirror" and "An Appearance." The most convenient for illustration, though, is "Face Lift," whose title immediately indicates the focus on the distinctive aspect of the female body, which exists as a fetishized object of representation in phallogocentric discourse. Because of the titular medical procedure, the speaker's face ceases to be a reliable point of identification, which causes the split in her identity. This split then becomes the starting point for a number of transitions that blur the boundary between sign and meaning, and lock the speaker in the ritualized process of constructing and deconstructing meanings.

Among the most prominent transitions in "Face Lift" is that from the surface to depth. This dichotomy is identified with that of face and identity, and boundaries associated with both are intentionally blurred. To elaborate on this assumption, the reference to the cosmetic

[169] Sylvia Plath, "Widow," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 164.
[170] Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" 40.

surgery suggests the way women are relegated to the sphere of surface. Correspondingly, the speaker possesses multiple faces, disguised as masks, a fact upon which she comments: "Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper."[171] The first stanza recalls the speaker's memory of being fed "through a frog-mask."[172] Simultaneously, her double comes home from the clinic in her "tight white [m]ummy cloths."[173] In the second stanza, in which the speaker describes being stripped off her clothing before the surgery, she disguises herself into *dramatis personae,* as her nudity is that of Cleopatra.[174] The third stanza presents her in the middle of getting used to her brand new mask, and she comments on the effect of the change in stanzas five and six: "When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I'm twenty, / Broody and in long skirts on my first husband's sofa […]."[175] Here, Plath hyperbolically describes the result of the procedure whose main purpose is to make the speaker look younger. The speaker is not only adopting an appearance of her twenty-year-old self, she *becomes* her younger self by identifying with her mask as if she were a performer in a Greek drama. In the last stanza, the speaker's former appearance is described as the "[o]ld sock-face, sagged on a darning egg," while its new version (i.e. the one present in stanzas one and three) emerges "swaddled in gauze."[176]

As a direct consequence of possessing several appearances, the speaker's identity becomes multiplied. The first example of multiplying is present in the first stanza, where the speaking "I" engages in a conversation with its counterpart "you" that appears in the line "You bring me good news from the clinic […]."[177] The second multiplication occurs in the last stanza, and it is initiated by the act of looking into the mirror, explicitly introducing a mirror double into discourse: "I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror— / Old sock face, sagged on the darning egg."[178] Eventually, the new, younger "I," which is "[p]ink and smooth as a baby,"[179] alternates with its previous version, now disguised as "she" and "the dewlapped lady."[180]

The series of transitions does not end with the interplay of surface and depth, and, simultaneously, of body and identity – it continues to cause confusion in terms of the

[171] Sylvia Plath, "Face Lift," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 156.
[172] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[173] Plath, "Face Lift" 155.
[174] Christina Britzolakis, "Gothic Subjectivity," *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007) 132.
[175] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[176] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[177] Plath, "Face Lift" 155.
[178] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[179] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[180] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.

subject/object dichotomy. In the poem, each self possesses her own linguistic identity, and the speaker constantly attempts to locate the point at which she may comprehend herself as both subject and object. It is reflected in the way Plath engages in combining different types of speech, and adjusting her choice of metaphors in accordance with the speaker. For example, in lines four and five of the first stanza, the speaker automatically adopts the way a nine-year-old child would describe reality: "When I was nine, a lime green anesthetist / Fed me banana gas through a frog mask […]."[181] Such comparisons, restricted to the use of colors, fruits and animals, are in obvious contrast with the following ones: "The nauseous vault / Boomed with bad dreams and the Jovian voices of surgeons." [182] Here, the speaker chooses more sophisticated vocabulary, with references to her possible academic background, as the metaphor "Jovian voices,"[183] with its hyper-correct use of the adjectival form, may suggest. The transitions manifest themselves especially in situations when it is impossible to tell which of the selves is speaking. For example, it is not specified whether the statement "I'm alright"[184] in the first stanza is uttered by the "I" or the "you." Similarly, it remains a mystery whether the experiences described in the second stanza belong to the speaker's sick nine-year-old self, or to her older version that is undergoing a face-lift.

Another transition is threefold, and it involves present/past, presence/absence and life/death dichotomies, all blurred due to the disruption in the linear structure of time. As soon as the double emerges, the speaker's original self is already in the past, absent and in the state of perish. In the first instance of doubling, the aged self is relegated to the position of "you." The "you" recounts the way it has reached the limit of its existence by returning to its previous subjectivity in the second stanza: "Darkness wipes me out like a chalk on a blackboard … / I don't know a thing."[185] In the second instance, the speaker also describes the original self as the object, which is characterized by its absence: "Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady […] / They have trapped her in some laboratory jar."[186] The new, younger self, who has already made her appearance in the first stanza, takes over and makes flippant remarks about her self-orchestrated rebirth, e.g. "I grow backward," and "Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze, / Pink and smooth as a baby."[187]

[181] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[182] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[183] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[184] Plath, "Face Lift" 155.
[185] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[186] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[187] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.

Due to multiple transitions, "Face Lift" resembles a series of circles within a larger circle. The reversed process of aging implied by the titular procedure is referentially interconnected with the non-linear perception of time, and both phenomena are engulfed in the structure which conflates the speaking body with the body of the poem. The poem contains evidence for Kristeva's assumption that the basic unit of poetic language, "literary word," is a dialogue among several writings (i.e. that of a writer, the character and the historical and cultural context) rather than a fixed meaning.[188] To prove this point, Plath makes the speaker's identity reach the border of the discourse (implied particularly in the lines "Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard. . . / I don't know a thing,"[189] in which the speaker's body becomes an empty page to be written on) until her body becomes an empty signifier, ready for new meanings (disguised as new selves) to emerge. By these means, Plath illustrates that while being caught in political, ideological and cultural system which identifies women by their youthful appearances, the poetic language may offer a certain kind of progression from the seemingly inconceivable situation. The poet thus unconsciously adheres to the principles of *l'écriture féminine* – she engages the semiotic chora (in the form of masking and staging, adopting several independent voices and giving a ritual character to the whole ordeal) to let the feminine into discourse and to ensure its plurality and continuous movement. Such an effect is further reinforced in relation to fertility and creativity, the themes which will be considered in the next section.

3.4. "And Love the mother of milk, no theory"[190]: Fertility and Creativity

Poems dealing with fertility and creativity represent a perfect occasion for inscribing female difference into language. As was illustrated in the previous chapter, many poems in *The Colossus* link female desire and fertility to aesthetic creativity. In a way, *Crossing the Water* continues in the tradition of *The Colossus'* poems – "Stillborn," "Magi," "Barren Woman" and "Heavy Women" intertwine biological and artistic creation. During this period, however, the link becomes multi-faceted, as it is implied not only thematically, but also stylistically and discursively.

One may discover parallels between Plath's recurrent tropes of pregnancy with Kristeva's explanation of its discursive dimension. In both cases, it becomes

[188] Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" 36.
[189] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[190] Sylvia Plath, "Magi," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 148.

> an escape from the temporality of day-today social obligations, an interruption of the regular monthly cycles, where the surfaces – skin, sight – are abandoned in favour of a descent into the depths of the body, where one hears, tastes and smells the infinitesimal life of the cells.[191]

In Plath's poems, pregnancy is a kind of organic multiplying that gives its speakers a sense of inhabiting their own bodies, an assumption that is supported by her journal note from 1962, in which she described giving birth to her son Nicholas:

> Instead of the mindless crawling about and beating my head against the wall as with the worst cramps with Frieda, I felt perfectly in possession of myself, able to <u>do</u> something to myself.[192] [original emphasis]

Its termination, in contrast, makes the poet feel empty, disembodied and desiring to retreat into isolation while being constantly exposed to historical and social pressures.[193]

The poem used for illustration is "Parliament Hill Fields." According to Perloff, it is the only truly transitional poem in *Crossing the Water*, though it is definitely not the only poem containing numerous transitions. Like "Face Lift," "Parliament Hill Fields" conflates the body of the author, the body of the speaker, and the body of the poem. In both poems, the speaker categorizes herself as a mother. The difference is that in "Face Lift," she uses motherhood as a metaphor (i.e. the speaker becomes a "[m]other to [herself]"[194] because of the multiplication caused by the surgery, which represents an opportunity for rebirth and for placing oneself beyond the linear time), whereas in "Parliament Hill Fields," the speaker is a mother in literal sense (i.e. she has one child already and lost her second one before it could be born).

At the first sight, "Parliament Hill Fields" may appear as a conventional poem depicting the feeling of loss. It becomes interesting in relation to biographical information – Plath experienced miscarriage shortly before writing the poem.[195] Such connection makes the poem convenient for analysis through the lens of *l'écriture féminine.* In "Parliament Hill Fields," the process of multiplying is reversed, i.e. the poem depicts the loss of plurality rather than its emergence. All transitions which were present in "Face Lift" thus move in the opposite direction, i.e. from plurality into the "lack," from being present into being absent,

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[191] Kristeva, "About Chinese Women" 154.
[192] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 645.
[193] Marjorie G. Perloff, "On the Road to 'Ariel': The 'Transitional' Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *The Iowa Review* 4.2 (1973) 96.
[194] Plath, "Face Lift" 156.
[195] Lois Ames, "Notes Toward a Biography," *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium,* ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970) 170.

from the focus on depths of the speaker's body into the fixation on outer surfaces, and from cyclical measurement of time into the constrains of historical time. In the poem, miscarriage is presented as the speaker's figurative embodiment of the "lack." This lack, however, is not motivated by Freudian "penis envy" – it is caused by the abrupt dissociation of the fetus from the body of the mother. By lacking her double, the speaker feels as if she had lost "a vital part of herself, without which she becomes a sheer vacuum, an empty vessel."[196] She thus dreams of complete dissolution of her body, for becoming inanimate, unnecessary and even downright absent. Her wish is reflected in frequent images of dissolution – she describes herself being swallowed by "[a] crocodile of small girls"[197] and being turned into "a stone, a stick."[198] She imagines herself circling the trees as "[g]host of a leaf, ghost of a bird,"[199] while her mind runs with "the heath grass glitters and the spindling rivulets,"[200] which "[u]nspool and spend themselves."[201]

The absence of the fetus equals the lack of inherently divided subject, which, in turn, equals the lack of stable signifiers. For the speaker, the absence of the fetus is equaled with the lack of articulation, as she repeatedly depicts herself as being unable to translate her emotions into words. For example, in the first stanza, she declares: "Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack."[202] In the fourth stanza, the speaker claims: "Now silence after silence offers itself. / The wind stops my breath like a bandage."[203] And, finally, the sixth stanza begins with the line: "The tumulus, even at noon, guards its black shadow […]."[204] By the lack of articulation on the speaker's part, the poem illustrates the failure of attempted identification with the embryo (the speaker's double and her Other), which is dissociated from the body of the speaker and, due to the miscarriage, from the body of the mother. It illustrates Kristeva's thought about the inter-relation between the speaker and its Other – when the Other is in the sphere of negativity, it reaches the border of the subjective text, and in terms of masculine discourse, it becomes silenced.

As yet another consequence of her miscarriage, the speaker reorients her focus from the depths of her body to empty surfaces. The focus on surfaces is reflected in the trope of

[196] Perloff, "On the Road to 'Ariel'" 96.
[197] Sylvia Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields," *Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 152.
[198] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[199] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 153.
[200] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[201] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[202] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[203] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[204] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 153.

roundness (referring to embryo, pregnancy belly as well as life cycle) being repeated over and over throughout the whole poem. For example, in the first stanza, "[t]he round sky goes on minding its business."[205] In the sixth stanza, the speaker exclaims: "I circle the writhen trees. I am too happy."[206] More round shapes are present in the ninth and tenth stanzas – there are "orange pompons" and a "cellophane balloon."[207]

The trope of roundness is extended so that it concerns even round, smooth, vast or featureless surfaces. The first stanza is comprised of the interplay of these kinds of polished surfaces: "On this bald hill the new year hones its edge. / Faceless and pale as china / The round sky goes on minding its business."[208] In the second through the third stanza, "[t]he wan / Sun manages to strike such tin glints / From the linked ponds that my eyes wince / And brim; the city melts like sugar."[209] A result the speaker's focus on surfaces is the inability to see some objects in their concrete forms – there are only their contours, as if she was looking at them behind a glass. According to Jones, the focus on surfaces constitutes a pathetic fallacy, which corresponds with the speaker's lack – it represents "a sequence of self-contained patinas identifiable only by their lack of attributes."[210] Such featurelessness, for Jones, is a mark of the "negative presencing,"[211] i.e. the speaker perceives absence as an attribute of all present objects, enabling the poet to construct a sense of absence even as she establishes presence.[212] This transition influences the speaker's reality, since she becomes torn between her wish to be absent like her unborn child, and the pressure to be present for her husband and daughter.

The loss of the child (characterized as the missing part of the speaker) is in its nature paradoxical – it illustrates the speaker as the center of the production, both biological and linguistic. However, there is another child waiting within the house, implied in the lines "Now, on the nursery wall, / The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill / In your sister's birthday picture starts to glow."[213] If one adhered to Kristeva's theory, the child then becomes "sole evidence, for the symbolic order, of *jouissance* and pregnancy, thanks to whom the woman will be coded in the chain of production and thus perceived as a temporalized

[205] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[206] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 153.
[207] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 153.
[208] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[209] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 152.
[210] Jones, "Silence of another order" 94.
[211] Jones, "Silence of another order" 96.
[212] Jones, "Silence of another order" 96.
[213] Plath, "Parliament Hill Fields" 153.

parent."[214] The speaking subject thus multiplies itself, both physically (through giving birth to one child and being a temporal host for the fetus), and linguistically by generating her own symbolic system, which is independent from the phallogocentric one.

3.5. "Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar"[215]: Living and Dying

In the previous section, Plath's work with *jouissance* as *telos* was considered. However, there is yet another drive to be considered in Plath's poems, the so-called "death-drive."[216] Its functioning in Plath's poetry is similar to *jouissance,* since both are organized by negativity. It is the central paradox of Plath's poems (and the transition which is included in Plath's poetry from the very beginning) that one cannot limit the *telos* of Plath's poetry to death only. Many poems in her oeuvre display the tension between intense longing for death and dissolution, and the equally intense wish for living and being a part of a production chain. At the same time, they include the cycle of death and rebirth, i.e. they record the death of an old self and the creation of a new self, and the celebration of selfhood at the moment of annihilation later becomes a favorite theme of many of Plath's poems.[217] Plath's work with the theme of death then does not necessarily mean a suicidal wish; it may as well be a path to transformation. Plath's transitional poems illustrate that life is perpetual. As Jones claims, repetition of the death trope aids to the triumph of rebirth.[218]

There are numerous poems in *Crossing the Water* which may offer themselves for detailed analysis, e.g. "Widow," "Last Words" and "Event." However, one could hardly come across a poem more crucial for Plath's transitional phase than "Crossing the Water." Like the already analyzed "Parliament Hill Fields," the poem is truly transitional, not only because it contains numerous transitions, but also because it is a perfectly balanced mix of tradition and innovation, which provides the reader with the context for the seemingly radical break in *Ariel* poems.

In a sense, "Crossing the Water" is very similar to Plath's early landscape poems, in which she tended to connect the landscape with the speaker's mindscape, thus creating a blend of descriptive-meditative poems with psychoanalytical explorations. Her personal experience while sailing across the Canadian lake, anchored in reality as well as her consciousness by its geographical location, is made parallel to the Greek myth about the

[214] Kristeva, "About Chinese Women" 154.
[215] Plath, "Widow" 164.
[216] Jones, "Silence of another order" 86.
[217] Kendall 13.
[218] Jones 86.

ferryman of the dead, presenting her with a mythologized space for considering the processes of her psyche through the variety of dreamy mirror-like images and doubles.

Yet, one may observe some deviations from the poems discussed in previous sections. The focus is shifted away from the body of the speaker; therefore, the process of doubling is constructed by different means than conflating the physical body with the speaking body of the subject and then proceeding to the creation of metonymic representations of the split selves. The poem constitutes its body from parallelisms between sound and meaning, combining formal (stemming from Plath's "sensuous and emotional experiences"[219]) and material imagination (represented images which stem from the matter).[220]

It is particularly the sound part which, had *Crossing the Water* been published before *Ariel,* would represent a prelude to the style of Plath's late poems. The first line of the first stanza already offers a variety of devices, the most prominent being the abundance of liquid consonants. The reason for their accumulation could be at least two-fold – on the one hand, the sheer number of lateral and rhotic sounds may "enhance the liquid quality not only of the flowers and leaves but of the whole stanza, as the content demands."[221] On the other hand, there is the auditory logic of the poem to be considered. The recitation of some parts of the poem makes the reader's tongue stumble over his/her teeth in a manner similar to a tongue twister, and such complicated delivery of the lines is in contrast with the implied silence of the Underworld scenery as well as the image of the boat gliding smoothly across the surface of the lake.

Another prevailing trait is Plath's use of repetition, examples may include the repetition of the word "black" in the first line: "Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people."[222] Similarly, there is the repetition of conjunctions in the line "They are round and flat and full of dark advice."[223] This repetition may mimic the beating of the boat's oars against the surface of the water. Other instances of the poet's play with sound involve alliteration ("black boat," "cover Canada," "flat and full," and "little light"), assonance (present in the line one of the first stanza in "lake" and "paper," in line two in "trees" and "here," and in line three in "shadows" and "Canada") and consonance (appearing in the first stanza, line two in "where" and "here").

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[219] Orr 169.
[220] Renaux 100.
[221] Renaux 102.
[222] Sylvia Plath, "Crossing the Water," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 190.
[223] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.

In comparison to the colorfulness and fluidity of sound patterns, the poem's imagery may appear as quite conventional and restricted to the basic contrasts between black and white, stasis and movement, and life and death. Like in the case of "Parliament Hill Fields," there is an intentional indefiniteness to these images. Their easy contrast and intentional vagueness, in combination with verbs conveying movement ("go," "hurry," and "shake") accommodate a series of subtle transitions, which are realized in a concentric manner. One may as well begin the analysis of these transitions with the one from light into darkness.

These features are contrasted, and, at the same time, embedded within a single image. The luminescence of water flowers, for example, is put in contrast with the darkness of the lake of the Underworld, the shadow of the trees lining its banks, and black wood of the boat gliding across its surface. The luminescence of natural imagery, however, is interconnected with the darkness of its parts, e.g. the whiteness of water lilies is immediately surrounded by the darkness of the plant's leaves: "A little light is filtering from the water flowers. / Their leaves do not wish us to hurry: / They are round and flat and full of dark advice."[224]

As for the roundness of the leaves, their description is by no means random. Like in "Parliament Hill Fields," Plath concentrates on circular shapes in "Crossing the Water." The poem's concentric images include the shape of the lake (its shape, even if not completely regular, stands in opposition to the length of river Styx), blooming water lilies and their "round and flat"[225] leaves, the reference to "[c]old worlds"[226] and stars. Moreover, the list of concentric images includes these which are implied inter-textually, e.g. circles on the water caused by the movement of oars, images suggesting cyclical rituals (stars disguised as lilies, which are periodically opening and closing, the cycle of life, etc. Similarly, there are the already mentioned parallelisms between sound and meaning, which, according to Renaux, "reverberate from one line and one image to the next, annulling formal frontiers and thus foreshadowing the fluidity […]," [227] therefore; their textual movement resembles the expanding circles on the water.

Like in the case of "Parliament Hill Fields," death is associated with silence. In the second stanza, the omniscient speaker asks the reader: "Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens? / This is the silence of astounded souls."[228] Besides the fact that the

[224] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.
[225] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.
[226] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.
[227] Renaux 102.
[228] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.

expression "expressionless sirens"[229] is almost an oxymoron, since the main characteristic of sirens is their voice, it is also worth noting that this image is put in contrast with the sound pattern of the poem. Whereas the recurrent character of distinct sounds conveys movement, the poem's imagery suggests its opposite, stasis. The sirens no longer need to sing to lure the boatmen, and the reference to the "silence of the astounded souls"[230] means that the discourse has stopped its movement, at least in a linear fashion.

Despite the title of the poem being "Crossing the Water," the poet appears to hesitate in reaching the opposite bank of the metaphorical lake. The lake (or, more generally, water) represents a strong metaphor in psychoanalysis as well as in Plath's poetry. In Freudian psychoanalysis, all women's narratives are generated by hysterical consciousness, which is compared to the "unnavigable river" and which could be tamed by the creation of "intelligible, consistent, and unbroken history."[231]

In terms of *l'écriture féminine,* however, linear history is rejected. According to Irigaray, women's writing involves different economy of language – one that "upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse [...]."[232] Plath as if chose the circular shape of the lake to reinforce this thought. The lake itself is presented as a negative space and the source of the semiotic chora (realized in the poem through the combination of sounds and meanings). For *l'écriture féminine*, the water does not separate, and the lake represents "an underwater, trans-verbal communication between bodies."[233] The lake, despite being associated with death and the Underworld, is a source of life as well as the poet's creative energy – trees "drink here,"[234] water lilies bloom on its surface and fish live underwater. For the poet, it may be the journey itself which is the poet's image of progression. Like "Face Lift" and "Parliament Hill Fields," the closing poem of this chapter represents a cycle without closure.

3.6. "Now I'm close enough, I open my arms"[235]: Chapter Summary

Considering all the poems analyzed in previous sections, one may agree with Kendall's assertion that *Crossing the Water* contains "poems of becoming rather than

[229] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.
[230] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.
[231] Maud Ellman, "Psychoanalysis and Autobiography," *A History of English Autobiography,* ed. Adam Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016) 315.
[232] Irigaray, *This Sex* 29-30.
[233] Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 182.
[234] Plath, "Crossing the Water" 190.
[235] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 602.

being."[236] Plath's emphasis on motion is implied in both sound and meaning of individual signs, but it is not linear – it is atemporal, unstable, and without a closure. Such a strategy raises a number of questions, among them the question whether the female Prometheus could unbind herself if she is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

Looking back at "Face Lift," "Parliament Hill Fields" and "Crossing the Water," one may observe the way Plath attempts to define herself against her male predecessors, as well as phallogocentric discourse. Most probably influenced by her sessions with her psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher, Plath attempted to undergo Freud's "talking cure." Instead of authorizing the verbal manifestations of her body (which, in terms of psychoanalysis, would be described as "the hysteric body") in accordance to the symbolic order, she let her text be organized by negativity, and made use of the semiotic chora (voice, gestures, masking/staging, ritual, and myth).[237]

Negativity as the organizing principle enables Plath to disrupt static forms in order to reach beyond the borders of the symbolic and inscribe the feminine into discourse. It is produced by the semiotic mode of consciousness, which combined *jouissance* and the death-drive as *telos.* It puts emphasis on circular shapes, symbolizing women's cycles and the life cycle. Plath's writing is thus getting its power from the fluid source, and the process of signification is circular, much like the circles on the water, forever expanding.

[236] Kendall 51.
[237] Erella Brown, "The Lake of Seduction: Body, Acting and Voice in Hélène Cixous's *Portrait de Dora,*" *Modern Drama* 39.4 (1996) 626.

4. The Female Prometheus Unbound: Plath's Late Poetry

The publication of Plath's last collections *Ariel* (1965) and *Winter Trees* (1971) did not escape controversies which revolve around Plath's biography as well as bibliography. The circumstances of their publication were similar yet different. Similarities first, *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* consist of poems written between 1960 and 1963, and both were published posthumously under Hughes' strong editorial control. Differences reflect the level of Plath's personal involvement in their completion – for *Ariel,* Plath provided a thought-through manuscript, whereas *Winter Trees* was Hughes' incentive exclusively.

In comparison to the early and transitional poetry, the late poems are considered to be the ones that most consistently examine gender roles and possibilities of women's expression both within and outside the conventional discourse. *L'écriture féminine* provides a convenient framework which enables reading these final poems as attempts at challenging the limits of phallocentric discourse and letting the feminine into discourse that resulted in unbinding of the female Prometheus.

4.1. "I am writing the best poems of my life; they will *make my name*"[238]: Plath's Triumph and Despair

Despite being created in the final years of Plath's life, therefore signifying closure to the poet's short career, these poems shaped the image of the poet in Western cultural consciousness. There are many aspects which influenced the reception of both *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*, but the most prominent ones are connected to Hughes' job as the editor of Plath's work. Many analysts emphasize the fact that there are two *Ariels* in Plath's oeuvre – one being the manuscript completed by Plath, and the other the volume edited by Hughes. Additionally, the selection of the U.S. version differs from the selection of the U.K. version, further complicating the whole concept of Plath's continuum. In 2004, the restored edition of *Ariel* was published. This recent version, which contains a foreword by Frieda Hughes, is a facsimile reflecting Plath's original selection of poems in their respective order.

Hughes' editing job had a huge impact on the impression left by *Ariel* – he changed the order of poems, omitted some pieces chosen by Plath (e.g. "Barren Woman," "The Rabbit

[238] Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963,* ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 468.

Catcher," "The Jailer," "The Other" and "Purdah," which were eventually published in *Winter Trees*) and included those Plath discarded ("The Hanging Man," "Paralytic," "Contusion" and "Edge"). Katha Pollitt illustrates how these seemingly minor changes affect the overall tone of the collection – *Ariel* as edited by Hughes supposedly ends "in a note of absolute despair,"[239] reflected in the concluding poem "Edge," as opposed to the manuscript, which ends in a "note of triumph,"[240] conveyed by the cycle of Bee poems ("The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee-Box," "Stings" and "Wintering").

Considering biographical data, it is an undeniable fact that many late poems of Plath's were influenced by the strenuous experiences of that time, and as such, they tempt the reader to interpret them as preludes to their author's personal as well as creative exhaustion. Hughes' editorial intervention emphasized the already dark tone of Plath's late poems. Half a century after its publication, there are ongoing disputes whether they were composed with the intention of becoming the poet's "suicide note[s]"[241] or a series of letters celebrating life.

In their quest to answer this question, many analysts do not hesitate to venture out into the realm of "what if," like Pollitt did in her much-quoted review:

> It is often said that when she died, she had gone as far as poetry could take her, and indeed, the very last poems do seem to leave no way out. I cannot believe, though, that a poet as fertile and energetic and fearless as Plath here shows herself could ever have been reduced to silence by her own imagination. Had she lived, like Lady Lazarus, she would have transformed herself yet again, as she had done before.[242]

Sanazaro gives the impression of sharing Pollitt's opinion. He interprets Plath's late poems as products of desire for a new life. In his opinion, Plath skillfully transformed her personal troubles as well as her need to gain financial and creative independence into poems which are detached from "old patterns that had dominated her life and her very conception of self."[243] In other words, he considers the late poems as having the potential to "make [Plath's] name"[244] as well as "[come] more directly from inside herself."[245]

All considerations of possibility and probability aside, there are actual instances of development in Plath's poetic voice to be taken into account. The most popular view favors the image of late poetry as "pulling it off," i.e. putting the break initiated in *Crossing the*

[239] Pollitt 68.
[240] Pollitt 68.
[241] Pollitt 68.
[242] Pollitt 72.
[243] Leonard Sanazaro, "The Transfiguring Self: Sylvia Plath, A Reconsideration," *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 88.
[244] Plath, *Letters Home* 468.
[245] Juhasz 101.

Water into effect. This break is not so prominent in terms of themes, but may be observed especially in form and diction of the individual poems. *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* then may be considered an elaboration on previously established themes, such as the female body and identity, women's fertility and creativity, and living and dying. The main change consists of Plath's urgent and at times even aggressive approach to these themes, which is reflected in the language she uses in her late poems, the kind which corresponds to the principles of *l'écriture féminine,* and which will be considered in detail in the following section.

4.2. "Echoing, echoing"[246]: Themes and Style

The evolution of poetic language mirrors the evolution of the speaking subjects as well as the author. Plath's personal experiences in this period are reflected primarily in the abandonment of fixed poetic forms. In comparison to her early and transitional poetry, Plath's poems in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* are specific for their shift towards a more performative rhetoric – as Christina Britzolakis points out, the later poems are "spoken" rather than "written."[247] Judging from Plath's partiality to reading her poems out loud, her language becomes energized by the semiotic function of the signifying process. One may observe how the mimesis of non-

are either supported by the hysterical, impatient and demanding tone or they are at odds with the light tone which is alternatively mocking, pretentious, childish and ironical. To illustrate this assumption with examples, the snippy and accusing tone of "Poppies in July" corresponds with the speaker's resentment towards the flowers. In contrast, "Lady Lazarus" employs an verbal as well as pre-verbal sounds as well as the spoken tongue, including vernacular and colloquialism, significantly contributes to the disruption of formality, and suggests closeness of Plath's verses to *l'écriture féminine.*

Plath's focus shifts from the form to the tone of her poems. Serious subjects amused and at times even mocking tone, which, in combination with the images of endless suffering, makes the speaker's light tone appear as an act of bravado.

Other poems make use of the overly enthusiastic rhetoric of children, e.g. "A Birthday Present" mimics childish eagerness in the first couplet: "What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful? / It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?"[248] Such a tone mirrors the speaker's reluctant enthusiasm for celebrating her birthday, an event which fills her with

[246] Sylvia Plath, "Elm," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 192.
[247] Britzolakis 121.
[248] Sylvia Plath, "A Birthday Present," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 206.

contradictory feelings. Plath also features musical devices and semiotic breaks, which give the impression of nursery rhymes; however, combined with the atmosphere of barely suppressed rage, her verses may resemble infantile tantrums, overacted theatrical monologues or bewitching incantations.

The most prominent feature which conveys such an impression is repetition. In terms of Plath's poems, this feature is not entirely an innovation, since it appeared in pre-1960s poems as well; however, poems in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* are specific for the repetition's frequency as well as its various functions. Analysts of Plath's work offer several explanations for the repetition's increased use – some accuse Plath of the abuse of this feature for the sake of abundance, while others interpret it as a device for heightening intensity.[249] Both may be true, since Plath tends to manipulate the mood through repetition. In some instances, she disrupts the serious tone of the poem by repeating certain words in the form of a silly tongue-twister or a nursery rhyme. "A Birthday Present," for example, contains the repetition "Adhering to rules, rules, rules"[250] that may resemble a naughty child's tantrum, its heavy stresses mimicking an angry foot-stomping. Similarly, the first stanza of "Daddy," which combines repetition, vernacular and transcription of non-verbal sounds, conveys the impression of a very young speaker performing a counting-out rhyme:

> You do not do, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> For thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.[251]

Other examples include the third stanza of "The Munich Mannequins," which contains the rhyme "Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose. / The blood flood is the flood of love […]."[252] Here, repeated phrases in combination with assonances in words unl*oo*sing, m*oo*ns, bl*oo*d, fl*oo*d and l*o*ve convey the impression of a tongue-twister, its childishness corresponding with the word "children" in the opening line. On the other hand, epithets in "Elm" ("That kill, that kill, that kill."[253]) and "The Applicant" ("Will you marry it,

[249] Kendall 148.
[250] Plath, "A Birthday Present" 206.
[251] Sylvia Plath, "Daddy," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 222.
[252] Sylvia Plath, "The Munich Mannequins," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 263.
[253] Plath, "Elm" 193.

marry it, marry it."[254]) create the atmosphere of hopelessness and thus enhance the dramatic character of the whole poem.

In addition to the stylistic use of the trope, Jo Gill considers its thematic purpose. She attributes its thematic significance to Plath's frequent references to Greek mythology:

> [I]n classical mythology, Echo is the wood nymph in Ovid's story of Narcissus. Echo is unable to speak until spoken to; more chillingly, she 'cannot stay silent when another person speaks; but yet has not learned to speak first herself.' Rejected by the beautiful youth Narcissus, she fades away into the woods and caves until only her voice remains. The myth gives us the seeds of a tension which figures throughout *Ariel* between silence and voice.[255]

Gill's interpretation appears credible, since Plath tends to use mythical structures as thematic backgrounds to her poems. In this case, the myth of Echo is embedded in her consideration of both the art of writing as well as silencing, pointing out to the censure or complete absence of women's voices from high culture (be it religious, ceremonial, political and legal discourse, as well as poetry and prose) due to prohibitions and taboos.[256] Gill also describes the effect this trope has on selected poems:

> One effect of this trope is to suggest that the subject is somehow trapped in language, that the words echoing around her form an unbreakable barrier – almost like a bell jar – which offers no way out.[257]

This interpretation corresponds with Freudian post-traumatic "talking cure," in which being "stuck" in a cycle of repetition is a sign that the treatment is working, that the patient's ego is accessible and coherent.[258] It may also relate to Plath's possible status as the female Prometheus, forever bound in the strictly hierarchical system of signs which leaves only a narrow space in which to navigate the processes of her psyche. Poems such as "Daddy" confirm this interpretation, particularly this stanza: "I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw. / It stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak."[259]

In some cases, language in Plath's poems gives the impression of "giving up," of reaching the very edge of the discourse, and that the poet lacks strength to cross the imaginary border. Especially the poems which contain repetition as epithets convey the atmosphere of despair over the speaker's own inability to either be silent, or to speak her mind. According to

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[254] Sylvia Plath, "The Applicant," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 222.
[255] Gill 54.
[256] Cameron 4.
[257] Gill 54.
[258] Kriel 44.
[259] Plath, "Daddy" 223.

Cixous, the edge of discourse is the space in which *jouissance* takes place, ensuring the entrance of the feminine into the discourse. As a trope, repetition then possesses the potentially subversive function, since it tends to appear in moments in which the emotional dimension of the message is so great that it could not be encompassed in traditional hierarchical structures.

Plath also uses repetition as a device in which to mimic the sounds from the realm of the semiotic. Individual lexemes in repeated phrases then may appear as over-determined, i.e. as implying multiple meanings which they do not carry in ordinary usage and which even transcend the borders of the symbolic discourse.[260] To illustrate this assumption with examples, the phrase "That kill, that kill, that kill"[261] may be Plath's way of mimicking the sounds of the elm's branches and leaves moving in the wind, translated into a very tranquil yet sinister repetition of a single phrase. In "The Applicant," the speaker concludes the poem with "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it."[262] This utterance, though structured like a question, lacks a question mark in the end, and as such it may resemble banging of the gavel in auction when read with vigor. In the line "The dead bell, the dead bell"[263] in "Death & Co.," the message corresponds with its aural characteristics, which suggest the sound of the death knell, or, as Gill puts it, "reverberating sound which bounces from surface to surface and then carries across borders and into the unknown."[264]

In addition to repetition, Plath continues in the application of various poetic devices in order to make her poems intentionally imperfect. She uses particularly eye rhymes ("I guess you could say I've a *call*. / It's easy enough to do it in a *cell.*"[265]) and slant rhymes ("The dew that *flies* / Suicidal, at one with the *drive* […]"[266]). By engaging these seemingly minor details in her play with discourse, Plath's rhymes become more organic than the traditional controlled forms of her early poems.

In terms of Plath's poetic voice, it could be said that what was previously approached with a great caution and self-consciousness is now considered openly, with almost surreal delight in its explicitness and the brash quality of some forms. Ostriker describes this development quite fittingly: "One could summarize the change by saying that having learned

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[260] Julia Kristeva, "The System and the Speaking Subject," *The Kristeva Reader,* ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 28.
[261] Plath, "Elm" 193.
[262] Plath, "The Applicant" 222.
[263] Sylvia Plath, "Death & Co.," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 255.
[264] Gill 53.
[265] Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 245.
[266] Sylvia Plath, "Ariel," *The Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 240.

to see the skull beneath the skin, she threw away the skin."[267] Rather than throwing away the skin all at once, however, it appears that Plath kept removing it piece by piece, stripping off all the labels as if she engaged in "[t]he big strip-tease."[268] Ostriker's description of Plath's poetic development suggests two things – first, that the female body as both the source of the text and the means of subverting phallogocentric discourse remains among the most important themes in her poetry, and second, that its treatment becomes increasingly violent and destructive. This treatment, however, is still in accordance with *l'écriture féminine*. This assumption will be explained in the section below.

4.3. "The big strip-tease"[269]: Body and Identity

As Plath engages in a rather aggressive interrogation of gender labels, and it is reflected in language of her late poems, in which she submits the very concept of symbol and of the speaking subject to a radical examination. For these reasons, the next section preoccupied with Plath's work with the concept of body in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* will be divided into two sub-sections, the first devoted to the dissolution of predominantly phallogocentric discourse, and the second with the intentional fragmentation of the speaking subject. These strategies are crucial for the analysis of the text as an example of *l'écriture féminine,* since they allow the female Prometheus to unbind herself from the manacles of phallogocentric discourse.

4.3.1. "This toe and that toe, a relic"[270]: Dissolution of the Symbol

Plath's poems are well-known for their fixation on specific body parts which are employed as phallic and vaginal symbols, and, correspondingly, symbols of power. Poems in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* seem to continue in this tradition, since Plath concentrates on body parts which carry symbolic meanings established by psychoanalysis, e.g. feet, thumbs and toes. While some may interpret her approach as a case of phallic fetishism and of the poet's rage against imaginary castration, Plath does not rely on fixed symbolic meanings.[271] Since metaphors and metonymy allow her to transverse the linear logic of language and thus appropriate the discourse to her practice as a *female* poet, Plath experiments with heterogeneous meanings to reach the relative dissolution of the symbol.

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[267] Alicia Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983) 47.
[268] Plath, "Lady Lazarus" 245.
[269] Plath, "Lady Lazarus" 245.
[270] Sylvia Plath, "Gulliver," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 251.
[271] Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002) 152.

Through her continuum, toes and thumbs tend to be magnified, even to the point of being worshipped as ancient relics and religious icons. In "Gulliver," for example, there is a line: "This toe and that toe, a relic."[272] Similarly, in "Daddy," there is a looming presence of the father as a central concept, which is described as "[m]arble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe."[273] In "Cut," though, Plath's work with the symbol is quite different. The poem features a speaker who causes herself an injury, and thinks this incident hilarious, claiming: "What a thrill— / My thumb instead of an onion."[274] The thumb as the masculine symbol of power is bleeding. Such a trait is reserved for symbols of female genitalia (corresponding with the epithet, "Dirty girl, / Thumb stump,"[275] which may convey the image of a clitoris), and correspondingly, the speaker is surprised and even thrilled by this paradox. The trickle of blood then situates the speaker within the chronology of American history, from the Pilgrim Fathers toward the Cold War period, erasing the dichotomy between the personal and the political/historical.

The poem thus offers not only the psychoanalytical interpretation of the image of the thumb, but it also presents it as a "literary word." As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the "literary word" comprises the textual surfaces of the writer (the poem's motif probably reflects memory of her nanny, who cut her thumb), the speaker (whose domestic situation is both in harmony and at odds with the violence of the speaker's projections) and the historical and cultural context (the image of the bloodied thumb initiated a chain of reflections on American violent history).[276] The last domain is where the female-sexed text happens – the associations brought by the blood place the speaker beyond historical time. She is both present and absent at the same time, having American roots and simultaneously being placed into her kitchen, a situation which may bring into mind a quote by Cixous: "[O]ur blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end […]."[277]

Like thumbs and toes, feet, especially when having shoes or boots on them, are strong symbols in both Freudian theory and Plath's poems. While a foot is considered a phallic symbol, a shoe is its opposite, a vaginal symbol. Interestingly, in "Daddy," Plath juxtaposes the two in the first stanza: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I lived like a foot […]."[278] The black shoe entraps the speaker in its power of signification, and

[272] Plath, "Gulliver" 251.
[273] Plath, "Daddy" 222.
[274] Sylvia Plath, "Cut," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 235.
[275] Plath, "Cut" 236.
[276] Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" 36.
[277] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 878.
[278] Plath, "Daddy" 222.

it becomes a means of enforcing masculine power: "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you."[279] The same motif appears in "Berck-Plage": "This black boot has no mercy for anybody."[280]

The image of feet, specifically foot soles, is also present in the first line of "Morning Song": "The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Took its place among the elements."[281] Here, the newborn's feet represent a threshold of symbolic discourse – after the blow, the "bald cry" introduces the baby into pre-symbolic language, or, using Kristeva's terminology, the realm of the semiotic. The baby's voice then also becomes a door to another discourse for its mother – her detached manner toward giving birth changes when "[t]he clear vowels rise like balloons"[282] and she eventually manages to connect with her newborn child.

To elaborate on the meaning of this strategy to *l'écriture féminine,* Freudian phallic symbols reworked as a means of reinforcing phallogocentric discourse are ascribed new and often unanticipated meanings. As a result, the hierarchical division between the signifier and the signified is transformed into Kristeva's notion of a sign as "a multi-determined peak"[283] that ensures the heterogeneity of meanings, included the ones which are in direct opposition to Freudian interpretations.

4.3.2. "I have wanted to efface myself"[284]: Fragmentation of the Speaking Subject

The first two chapters of this thesis illustrated the way Plath's early and transitional poetry manages to disrupt linear hierarchy of closed signs. *The Colossus,* a rather self-conscious blend of tradition and innovation, puts the feminine and the masculine as well as the semiotic and the symbolic into opposition. The speaking subject tends to be fragmented by being comprised of the author, the speaker, and various *dramatic personae.* In *Crossing the Water,* Plath engaged in a process of multiplying, conveyed by a series of transitions, resulting in the emergence of multiple indeterminate voices. *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* make use of Plath's previous strategies, including her engagement in the metonymic fragmentation of the body and the staging of the various selves, to continue in challenging the idea of the static, preconceived speaking subject. *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* question how women's identities are

[279] Plath, "Daddy" 223.
[280] Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 197.
[281] Plath, "Morning Song" 156.
[282] Plath, "Morning Song" 157.
[283] Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" 40.
[284] Sylvia Plath, "Tulips," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 161.

constructed within masculine linguistic structures, and explore possibilities of its fragmentation.

In "The Applicant," for example, Plath considers her ambiguous attitude toward femininity, attributing to her two conflicting selves – one that desires to be a good wife and mother to her children, and another that fears the objectification and imposed silence going hand in hand with the 1950s and the 1960s ideals of womanhood and domesticity. From the opening line ("First, are you our sort of person?"[285]), it becomes clear that the interviewer represents some greater ideological entity. First, he puts the male addressee on trial, and gradually shapes him to fit within their ideological spectrum. Once the applicant is properly conscripted, he is introduced to his female counterpart. As the female figure comes "out of the closet"[286] where she was stored in her purity from the sight of the whole group, as the line "Naked as a paper to start"[287] may suggest, the interviewer prods the applicant to write the story for her by asking him: "Well, what do you think of *that*?"[288] Throughout the poem, the interviewer repeatedly encourages the applicant to define his female prize through his male gaze, telling him: "You have an eye, it's an image."[289] The means of constructing the woman's identity is through the marriage with the applicant, who provides her with several defining characteristics: "But in twenty-five years she'll be silver, / In fifty, gold."[290] These colors are chosen specifically to reflect the years which the bride spends in marriage with the applicant. In the poem, the applicant is the subject in process, i.e. he is granted some development, as opposed to his female counterpart.

As much as "The Applicant" is the illustration of how ideological linguistic codes construct feminine identities, "Tulips" illustrates the way women's poetic writing attempts to distort and subsequently re-construct identities imposed upon women. In the poem, the speaker is hospitalized, and being a patient has an oddly comforting effect for her, since it allows her to reach the state of absolute purity and freedom: "How free it is, you have no idea how free— / The peacefulness is so big it dazes you, / And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets."[291] Her words point out to the fact that the speaker is stripped not only off her day-clothes, but also of all masculine sociological codes, encoded in her name (being married, she is the bearer of her husband's last name), body (an instrument for male pleasure) and history

[285] Plath, "The Applicant" 221.
[286] Plath, "The Applicant" 221.
[287] Plath, "The Applicant" 221.
[288] Plath, "The Applicant" 221.
[289] Plath, "The Applicant" 222.
[290] Plath, "The Applicant" 221.
[291] Plath, "Tulips" 161.

(the Western cultural history that consigned women into the position of sexual objects). The speaker then becomes both a patient waiting for a surgery, but also an "empty" signifier, and such a state potentially allows the speaker to re-imagine herself, as she claims in the line "And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself."[292] Her peace, however, is disturbed by the gift of tulips, which remind her of her "loving associations,"[293] etching into her skin like "little smiling hooks."[294]

"Lady Lazarus" uses a slightly different strategy than "Tulips." Motivated by the workings of the death-drive, Plath relies on her strategy of the split of the self into body parts. In this case, these articles are transformed into trophies and consumer goods, serving as demonstrations of power of a heavily masculinized ideology. The skin of the speaker is transformed into a lampshade, foot into a paperweight, face into linen, and the rest of her body is turned into "[a] cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling."[295] In the second half of the poem, the speaker's passivity is switched into activity, as she appears to embrace her fragmentation. She even actively encourages it by engaging in an almost ceremonial strip-tease. She flaunts her suffering and dying body toward the "peanut-crunching crowd"[296] and pretends to be fascinated with their eagerness to see the show. The show consists of haphazardly shifting images, in which male figures called "Herr Doktor," "Herr Enemy," "Herr God" and "Her Lucifer" display the speaker in front of the audience in order to show them their patriarchal "opus," their "valuable" and the "pure gold baby,"[297] who subsequently "melts to a shriek,"[298] and who burns to ashes again and again. This poem again escapes any closure – the speaker may not wholly escape her objectification, but the poet is at least ensuring the movement of the discourse.

In poems such as "Elm," Plath combines both the death-drive and *jouissance* to reach the disintegration of the speaking subject. In the second stanza, the speaker asks the reader: "Is it the sea you hear in me, / Its dissatisfactions?"[299] The situation in this poem may bring one's attention back to the early poem "Full Fathom Five," discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Plath continues to rely on the sea is an important image for *l'écriture féminine – la mer*, meaning "sea," is very like *la mère*, the French word for "mother." In both "Elm" and "Full Fathom Five," the sea is presented as a source of the poet's creative power, and it is

[292] Plath, "Tulips" 161.
[293] Plath, "Tulips" 161.
[294] Plath, "Tulips" 160.
[295] Plath, "Lady Lazarus" 246.
[296] Plath, "Lady Lazarus" 245.
[297] Plath, "Lady Lazarus" 246.
[298] Plath, "Lady Lazarus" 246.
[299] Plath, "Elm" 192.

presented as a muse with a voice of its own. Correspondingly, it is presented as a distinctly feminine element, representing the female body and its juices. It is also considered to be the imaginary source of *jouissance,* the set of drives and the representation of non-verbal dimension, often associated with women's unconscious.[300] Similarly, the underground, which the speaker knows "with [her] great tap root,"[301] may be a corresponding image with the sea – it is presented as both the source of desire and fear that are both obliterated in traditional discourse.

4.4. "The blood jet is poetry"[302]: Fertility and Creativity

The majority of poems included in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* were written during the specific time of her life – in the period between 1960 and 1963, Plath, already a mother of one, had a miscarriage, gave birth to her second child, learned about Hughes' infidelity, and eventually separated from her husband. Her constant considerations of sexual desire, marriage, maternity and writing preoccupied her with intensity. Plath's poetry is more than ever before emphasizing female desire and its encoding into masculine socio-logical codes, and as a result, her late poems become more open and daring, exploring dimensions of women's eroticism and childbirth that were otherwise absent from masculine discourse. Both *jouissance* and the death-drive will be further explored in the following sections.

4.4.1. "The blood flood is the flood of love"[303]: *Jouissance* and Motherhood

Whereas Plath considered these issues on the creative level, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva focus on reformulating the Western conception of love and female desire on the level of theory. Kristeva's "About Chinese Women" considers the position of women within the Western monotheistic community. According to the French theorist, the Christian Word regards women only for procreation in the name of the father, i.e. not for giving birth, but by preparing children for baptism. In this sense, women's *jouissance* is disregarded.[304] Women's desire is thus equalized with her reproductive function, but at the same time, it disregards the act of giving birth.[305]

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[300] Kristeva, "The System and the Speaking Subject" 9-10.
[301] Plath, "Elm" 192.
[302] Sylvia Plath, "Kindness," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 270.
[303] Plath, "The Munich Mannequins" 263.
[304] Kristeva, "About Chinese Women" 146.
[305] Julia Kristeva and Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, "Talking about *Polylogue*," *French Feminist Thought*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Blackwell, 1987) 112.

Similar issues preoccupied Plath since the early stages of her career. Many of her poems oscillate between "horror at abject motherhood versus longing for and celebration of motherhood."[306] For example, the extensive poem "Three Women" contains contradictory voices of unnamed women, who, according to Gill, depict "dilemmas of women's bodies and choices in a masculinist society."[307] The fear of imaginary castration is present in the poem "Munich Mannequins." The mannequins are described as "[n]aked and bald in their furs, / Orange lollies on silver sticks, / Intolerable, without mind."[308] The speaker is repulsed by the unnatural perfection of the mannequins, claiming that "[p]erfection is terrible, it cannot have children."[309] The speaker then proceeds to explain the gift of fertility (with the use of the metaphor of menstruation, "[t]he blood flood is the flood of love,"[310]) which is, at the same time, "[t]he absolute sacrifice."[311]

The image of blood is especially prominent in "Kindness," a poem which contains one of Plath's famous statements about fertility and creativity: "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it. / You hand me two children, two roses."[312] It is questionable whether the speaker is male or female; nevertheless, the poem's range of metaphors, its similarities to "Cut" and the speaker's disguise as an abject may point out to the speaker's femaleness. The poem then may be seen as reflecting processes and thoughts of the abject maternal body and mind, and it is structured like a dialogue between two contrasting images of femininity, i.e. the social construct of the 1950s motherhood and domesticity on the one hand, and the attempt at self-affirmation through the process of poeticization as well as politicization of the female body on the other.[313]

The poem's first stanza draws on kindness as one of traits connected with the 1950s ideals of femininity. Plath's verses reflect on this construction through the images of a perfect American household with its abundance of sweets and trinkets:

Kindness glides about my house.
Dame Kindness, she is so nice!
The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke
In the windows, the mirrors

[306] Kriel 11.
[307] Gill 70.
[308] Plath, "The Munich Mannequins" 263.
[309] Plath, "The Munich Mannequins" 262.
[310] Plath, "The Munich Mannequins" 263.
[311] Plath, "The Munich Mannequins" 262.
[312] Plath, "Kindness" 270.
[313] Kriel 88.

Are filling with smiles.[314]

The referential chain which comprises this poem is interesting not because of the way it constructs itself, but because of the constant breakage of its individual parts. The series of pleasing yet heavily idealized images keeps being broken by potentially disruptive phenomena. In the second stanza, for example, a baby's scream forces the speaker to leave her imaginary landscape. The speaker, who is suddenly confronted with the child as a physical manifestation her own fertility, comments as follows: "What is so real as the cry of a child? / A rabbit's cry may be wilder / But it has no soul."[315]

The speaker attempts to return to her fantasies about sweetness (conveyed in lines "Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says. / Sugar is a necessary fluid"[316]); however, her thoughts are again disrupted by unwanted associations:

Its crystals a little poultice.
O kindness, kindness
Sweetly picking up pieces!
My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,
May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.[317]

Like in "Cut," the redness of blood establishes a connection between the abject maternal body and its historical context, in this case the bombing of Hiroshima, as the reference to "Japanese silks"[318] may suggest. The child's cry in the previous stanza then gains new (and slightly disturbing) connotations.

The images of blood and horror are soon broken by the entrance of the speaker's counterpart who attempts to restore the illusion of kindness permeating their ideal domestic surroundings: "And here you come, with a cup of tea / Wreathed in steam."[319] Despite the relative calmness conveyed by these two lines, there is a threat in the husband's sudden appearance – the line "Wreathed in steam"[320] may refer back to the cup of hot tea, but also summons an image of the smoldering city as well as an American soldier, wearing a wreath of victory. Such impression further emphasizes the shaky and violent foundations of the 1950s ideal of femininity and *his*tory, and puts it in contrast to *her*story that establishes the maternal

[314] Plath, "Kindness" 269.
[315] Plath, "Kindness" 269.
[316] Plath, "Kindness" 269.
[317] Plath, "Kindness" 269.
[318] Plath, "Kindness" 269.
[319] Plath, "Kindness" 270.
[320] Plath, "Kindness" 270.

body as "the origin of the quintessence of reality and beauty,"[321] an image corresponding with the Cixousian idea of politicization as well as poeticization of the female body.

4.4.2. "There is nothing between us"[322]: The Paternal and the Maternal

Plath's late poetry is marked by consistent attempts to negotiate the relationship between the self and the father, the self and the husband, and the self and patriarchy in general.[323] The poet appears to go one step further by resolving also the relationship between the self and the mother, the daughter and matriarchy in general. In the Lacanian theory, the daughter (who must emulate her mother) is incapable of mastering the symbolic order, as she is both constructed by it and ultimately excluded from it.[324] Plath was well-aware of the fact that both the paternal and the maternal were important for her creativity, but she also tested the possibilities of creation in distance from both.

There are two poems that consider this issue, and these are "Daddy" and "Medusa." It may be no coincidence but the poems were written in succession – "Daddy" on 12 October 1962 and "Medusa" on 16 October 1962. Both conclude in similarly structured and, at the same time, very ambiguous declarations. They also reflect Plath's partiality to teasing the reader with biographical associations – the autobiographical material, which gives the impression of being randomly scattered throughout both poems, made many critics and analysts to establish a link between Otto Plath's German origin and the Nazi father in "Daddy," and Aurelia Schober Plath's life beyond the Atlantic with the reference to "Atlantic cable" in "Medusa."

Reading the poems through *l'écriture féminine,* neither "Daddy" nor "Medusa" appear as reflections on Plath's real parents, but rather as reflections on the paternal and the maternal in phallogocentric discourse. "Daddy" thus becomes "the imago of the father,"[325] i.e. the prototype of all men that is encoded in the Western cultural consciousness as the supreme authority, suggested by "a bag full of God."[326] In the poem, Plath presents him as a despotic ruler over reality and the owner of language, which the speaker describes as follows: "And the language obscene / An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau,

[321] Kriel 88.
[322] Sylvia Plath, "Medusa," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 226.
[323] Gill 60.
[324] Kriel 18.
[325] Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones, "Doing Away with Daddy: Exorcism and Sympathetic Magic in Plath's Poetry," *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1984) 125.
[326] Plath, "Daddy" 222.

Auschwitz, Belsen."[327] The inability to communicate with the father is transformed into ethnic, religious and ideological difference, since the speaker claims "[she] may well be a Jew."[328]

The similar development could be observed in "Medusa," which in turn contains "the imago of the mother." The mythical Medusa is a masculinized image of the original matrifocal culture's goddess and the prototype of the female *eros* as encoded by the male gaze structures encoded in Western consciousness.[329] In the poem, the masculinized image of the maternal principle is presented as suffocating and even horrifying, and it becomes an obstacle between the daughter and her father, and an inevitable source of identification for the daughter, as is suggested in the line "My mind winds to you / Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable […]."[330] The line "In any case, you are always there, / Tremulous breath at the end of my line"[331] is on the one hand an ambiguous reference to Plath's telephone calls with her mother and on the other a mark of Medusa's force within the female unconscious, illustrating its power every time the speaker utters a sentence.

Judging from the concluding lines in both poems, i.e. "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through"[332] and "There is nothing between us,"[333] both poems may be understood as symbolic enactments of patricide and matricide. Despite being ascribed characteristics of both Otto and Aurelia Plath, both the Father and the Mother are presented as symbols, and the poems also suggest such status in lines such as "Not God but a swastika"[334] in "Daddy," and the parody of Virgin Mary, "Blubbery Mary,"[335] in "Medusa." In search for the source of her creative energy, Plath decides to turn away from both the patriarchal God and Goddess, and reach into the depths of her body as well as psyche (a strategy favored by *l'écriture féminine*), as will be illustrated in the next section.

4.5. "We have come so far, it is over"[336]: Living and Dying

In comparison to the creative streak occurring in 1962 and culminating with the cycle of the Bee poems that tend to be described as a "parable of female self-assertion, or as a

[327] Plath, "Daddy" 223.
[328] Plath, "Daddy" 223.
[329] Susan R. Bowers, "Medusa and the Female Gaze," *NWSA Journal* 2.2 (1990) 217.
[330] Plath, "Medusa" 225.
[331] Plath, "Medusa" 225.
[332] Plath, "Daddy" 224.
[333] Plath, "Medusa" 226.
[334] Plath, "Daddy" 223.
[335] Plath, "Medusa" 225.
[336] Sylvia Plath, "Edge," *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 272.

narrative rite of rebirth,"[337] Plath's last poems from 1963 are considered to be rather "washed out."[338] These poems, which were eventually included in *Winter Trees,* are characterized as reflections of Plath's creative as well as emotional exhaustion. Looking back to the considerations whether the late poetry signifies triumph rather than failure, as well as Cixous's assumption that to write is to "avoid death,"[339] one may be tempted to analyze the collection's final poem rather than the Bee sequence. The analysis provided below will do exactly that, but its purpose is to neither rationalize Plath's psychic state nor determine the status of the poem as a sign of either triumph or failure; instead, "Edge" will be considered as a culmination of the whole cycle of Plath's creation as well as a potential example of a true *l'écriture féminine* poem that unbound the female Prometheus.

"Edge" is Plath's very last poem, written on 5 February 1963, a week before Plath's suicide. Correspondingly, many critics and analysts identified the dead woman with Plath herself, and such biographical links made many critics to bring into question Plath's personal enactment of the Medea-like infanticide. Instead of attempting to separate Plath from the figure of the poem or considering the author and the female figure as doubles, one may consider this ambiguity intentional. Plath supports the reader's confusion by including lines such as "The *illusion* of a Greek necessity"[340] [emphasis added] and "Her bare / Feet *seem* to be saying: / We have come so far it is over"[341] [emphasis added]. To answer the question whether the female figure in the poem should represent Plath or Medea, it may be neither or both.

In light of such ambiguity, the identity of the female figure dissolves. The loss of the signifier "I" (which stands for linearity, hierarchy as well as erection, conveyed even by the shape of its grapheme) is replaced by the circular "word-hole."[342] In the poem, the "word-hole" is represented by the abundance of "o" vowels, be it in the form of graphemes or phonemes, e.g. in "the scr*o*lls *o*f her t*o*ga"[343] and "We have c*o*me s*o* far, it is *o*ver."[344] Similarly, it is present in the line "*O*f a r*o*se cl*o*se when the garden / Stiffens and *o*d*o*rs bleed / Fr*o*m the sweet, deep thr*o*ats *o*f the night fl*o*wer"[345] and, finally, in the couplet "The m*oo*n has

[337] Gill 58.
[338] Kendall 190.
[339] Cixous, "Coming to Writing" 1.
[340] Plath, "Edge" 272.
[341] Plath, "Edge" 272.
[342] Paul Mitchell, *The Poetry of Negativity* (Valencia: University of Valencia, 2011) 186.
[343] Plath, "Edge" 272.
[344] Plath, "Edge" 272.
[345] Plath, "Edge" 273.

nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone."[346] Moreover, the circularity is conveyed by Plath's choice of imagery. Besides the moon (a frequent pregnancy metaphor in Plath's oeuvre) and the shape of blooming roses, one may also take into consideration the reference to "scrolls of her toga,"[347] the depiction of the woman's children as coiled white serpents, the shape of the neck of the "[p]itcher of milk"[348] and the circular anatomy of "deep throats of the night flower."[349] These frequent enjambments have a specific function – they weave a referential circle, which constitutes the body of the poem.

In "Edge," Plath appears to be faithful to her strategy of conflating the female body with the body of the poem, since its multi-leveled collection of round shapes conveys the image of the pregnancy belly. One may have already familiarized oneself with Plath's strategy of structuring her poems to reflect cycles of death and rebirth, in which the female body is the source of life and creative energy. "Edge" is no exception, even if the cycle here appears to move in the opposite direction – instead of being a source of production by giving birth, the woman absorbs the production back into her maternal body.

Her accomplishment is thus two-fold – motivated by *jouissance,* it both produces, and motivated by the death-drive, it destroys. The female figure experiences what Mitchell calls "a pure jouissance in death."[350] The poem, whose body is identical to the body of the female figure, becomes a mirror to itself. It both constructs and deconstructs itself, and its language, as Plath suggested in the title, stands on the edge – be it the edge of life and death, of production and destruction, of the semiotic and the symbolic. The poem's discourse is therefore a marginal discourse – a circle without end which could exhaust the potentialities of conventional language.

4.6. "Everything comes full circle"[351]: Chapter Summary

Undoubtedly, the development of Plath's poetic voice took a long way from the self-conscious verses of *The Colossus,* through the tentative approach in *Crossing the Water,* toward the unrestricted creative power in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees.* Her late poetry is characteristic for its gradually diminishing reliance on fixed poetic forms that is replaced by the poet's enthusiasm in experimentation with various structures and devices to depict the workings of her body as well as her psyche. While doing so, Plath does not hesitate to delve

[346] Plath, "Edge" 273.
[347] Plath, "Edge" 272.
[348] Plath, "Edge" 272.
[349] Plath, "Edge" 273.
[350] Mitchell 186.
[351] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 583.

into controversy which includes her use of ambiguously autobiographical material, the series of startling images of female desire and child-birth, references to the darker side of American history, and last but not least, the widely discussed and criticized references to the Holocaust.

Returning to some of the poems analyzed in this chapter, one may observe the ways in which Plath engages in the strategies of writing described by the *l'écriture féminine* movement. Besides the emphasis on heterogeneity, non-linearity and atemporality, poems such as "The Applicant," "Tulips" and "Lady Lazarus" examine socio-logical codes constructing women's identities, deconstruct their phallogocentric implications and propose new, heterogeneous meanings. Simultaneously, they illustrate the impact of such changes on the speaking subject that ceases to be a unitary representation of the castration complex, introducing new possibilities of constructing women's identities in literature. To further challenge and subvert phallogocentric order, Plath does not hesitate to attack its central symbols in poems such as "Daddy" and "Medusa."

The refusal of patriarchal Gods and Goddesses as the ultimate sources of creativity is also reflected in her approach to art, most consistently considered in "Kindness." The poem effectively connects women's fertility with their creativity, and illustrates Plath's diversion from Western social constructions of femininity as well as the idea of linear history by constructing a referential chain weaving itself within the female body. The whole range of attempts at subversion of phallogocentric discourse culminates in Plath's last poem, "Edge," which combines two seemingly opposing forces (i.e. *jouissance* and the death-drive) to unbind the poet from the manacles constructed by binary oppositions, be it the opposition between "male" and "female," "creation" and "destruction" of "life" and "death."

Conclusion

As was mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, Sylvia Plath remains a controversial figure. In the years following her death, many reviewers, critics and analysts attempted to categorize and label her literary persona, but their attempts were always hindered by the elusive nature of her work. In a sense, this thesis is no different – presenting Plath as a female Prometheus as well as analyzing her poetry through the lens of *l'écriture féminine* may often face a series of exceptions to its described (though not necessarily prescribed) principles.

Nevertheless, there are undeniable parallels between Plath's work and *l'écriture féminine.* True to the definition of *l'écriture féminine* as writing through the body, Plath's poems tend to conflate the female body with the body of the poem. The inner cycles of the female body, particularly *jouissance* and the death-drive, weave referential chains. These chains are characterized by heterogeneity of meanings, ensured by the working of the semiotic chora (including repetition, ellipses and syntactical inversions, staging and alternating intonations, often disguised as auditory components of Plath's poetry) and the inclination towards multiplicity, plurality and fluidity. The speaking "I" is realized as the subject-in-process, since the poems' subjects constantly undergo figurative dismemberment and fragmentation. Like the process of self-affirmation, the process of creation is also continuous, and is compared to the production of mother's milk or giving birth to oneself. In the poems depicting pregnancy, Plath shifts toward cyclical nature of women's time (as opposed to the linear conception of time, characterized by artificial dating, privileged by Western discourse) that gives birth to circular structures without closure.

These features were not inherent to Plath's poetry since the very beginning; they kept appearing within her continuum. Three chapters of this thesis were devoted to analyses of the individual phases of Plath's creation – the early phase, which covered the period between 1956 and early 1960, emphasized the largely Freudian character of Plath's first professional poems. The poetry of the bound female Prometheus is typical for its reliance on prescribed themes and structures that resulted in a series of contradictions. In the tradition of binary oppositions, the pairs are mutually exclusive and organized hierarchically – the female body, due to its identification with the patriarchal construction of the maternal, is perceived as an obstacle in the processes of self-definition and creation, both of which are located in the

paternal. True to its contradictory character; however, there are several poems that depict the struggle against phallogocentric discourse. These poems foreshadow the versatile, atemporal and circular character of Plath's later work.

The transitional phase, spanning approximately from late 1960 till 1961/2, is considered to be a crucial stage in the development of Plath's voice, the stage which began the process of unbinding of the female Prometheus. As opposed to the early reliance on contradictions, the transitional phase is characterized by its focus on transitions. These transitions resulted in increasingly dynamic and fluid character of Plath's poems, further reinforced by parallelisms between sound and meaning, and the combination between formal and material imagination. One may detect the real body within the body of Plath's transitional poetry; however, the central sign "I" tends to be fragmented, and its fragments rely on both *jouissance* and the death-drive as *telos* and poetic language as *logos*.

If the early phase is characterized by contradictions and the transitional phase by transitions, the late phase (covering the last two to three years of Plath's life, i.e. 1961/2–1963) is to be recognized for its series of dissolutions, marking the eventual unbinding of the female Prometheus. Instead of reaching perfection and pleasing the reader, her late poems become daring and explicit, exploring dimensions of the feminine that were absent from masculine discourse, e.g. female sexual desire, depictions of giving birth and its impact on the woman's body as well as consciousness, and dissolving the conception of *his*-story. In the process of creation, Plath no longer reaches into either the paternal or the maternal, but into her own body and the unconscious that become ultimate sources of creation.

The analysis of individual phases of her creations illustrates that the poet's "struggle against conventional man"[352] was indeed inevitable and very much real. Throughout her continuum, however, Plath insisted on writing *herself*, her *female* body and the processes of constructing her identity as *a woman* and *a poet*, two positions which she eventually realized were complementary rather than exclusive to each other. Such an outcome, in combination with the kind of poetry which "has ceased trying to please"[353] and which continues to defy all existing categories, may lead one to the assumption that the female Prometheus was, indeed, unbound.

[352] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 875.
[353] Kendall 208.

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